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DHONI

THE LEGEND AND THE LEGACY

+ HE SMILED AS HE KILLED BY TUNKU VARADARAJAN

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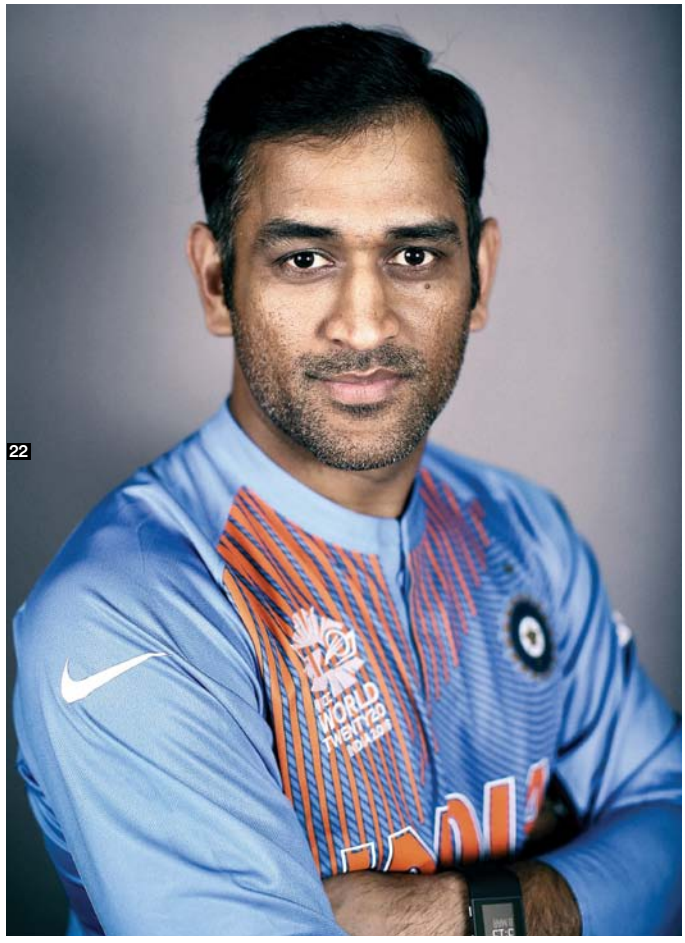

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LETTER OF THE WEEK

Congratulations and thanks to *Open* for such a wide range of brilliant writing in its Freedom Issue (August 24th, 2020). In this 74th year of Independence, we need to congratulate each other and enjoy our freedom ('The Ideal Pursuit' by MJ Akbar). The Partition saw the carving up of the subcontinent along sectarian lines, the massacre of millions and the rending asunder of a country into two, and then later three, making it one of mankind's greatest tragedies. When India celebrated its much-awaited freedom on August 15th, 1947, after being subjugated by the British for close to two centuries, no one could forget the enormous human cost that was paid for it. While our elders remember the deeds of the freedom fighters, their children are the future of this country. A major challenge for us is to prevent the brain drain to other countries as our best youth leave the country, first, for universities and, then, for jobs ('A Higher Degree'). We must take a pledge to make the most of what we have to rise to higher levels, so that instead of us migrating for a better life, others compete to come here for a better experience. We are still not halfway where middle-income countries such as Brazil and Sri Lanka are and there is already a worry that given how we are going, we might, at best, get stuck in the middle-income trap.

CK Subramaniam

GREAT FICTION

I read such an amazingly written story after a long time ('Tomorrow We Will Be Wolves', August 24th, 2020). Thanks to *Open* for bringing Deepa Anappara's marvellous writing to us.

Puja Roy

REAL COURAGE

I saw Kangana Ranaut's interview and tried hard not to believe what she was saying but ended up thinking she was right in many ways ('The Flame Thrower', August 3rd, 2020). First, she was speaking straight from the heart: no rehearsed scripts or dialogues for cheap claps. Secondly, espousing the cause of a dead actor by rubbing the who's who of the film industry the wrong way was never the politically correct thing to do; she's putting herself at great risk by being frank. Kangana knows very well the ramifications and consequences of her actions and yet chose to speak for the common good of her community which is often subjected to blackmail, manipulations and debauchery. She has herself faced persecution and ostracism, which she identified among reasons for the actor's death. Nepotism in Bollywood is not going to go away—just as it is not going away in any other sphere of life—but, one hopes, bias against the up and coming will become less tolerable in due course.

Bholey Bhardwaj

MORE THAN A PARTNER

Even though women's social standing in Shivrani Devi's time was hardly anything to talk about, she dared to cross the domestic threshold to create her own public persona ('Premchand's Partner' by Arnav Das Sharma, August 3rd, 2020). The insight into her life her memoir of her husband Premchand gives is compelling evidence of the roots of feminism in India. Fierce, bold and idealist, Shivrani Devi did not fail to challenge the orthodoxy of her times. Her marriage to Premchand itself showcased her as a social reformer. Through her literary nonfiction, she has presented to us an excellent alternative account of Premchand by showing the Hindi doyen's private life through her own eyes. It is an unfortunate fact as well as a comment on our literary establishment that despite the significance of her writing and contribution to the Indian freedom struggle, Shivrani Devi got eclipsed by the greatness of her husband.

Gaurav Pant

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By S PRASANNARAJAN

WHO'S AFRAID OF FACEBOOK?

DISINFORMATION IS DESTINY. What propels the war on hate speech today is the rage against the business model of social media, especially Facebook. A front page report in *The Wall Street Journal* on how some BJP hatemongers get away with their crime on Facebook pages has brought this war to Indian politics. The report wondered: If Facebook could banish an anti-Semitic zealot of Black nationalism and an unhinged conspiracy theorist, what stops it from meting out the same treatment to demagogues from the Indian Right? The report implied that it tolerated them because India was Facebook's biggest market, and the company's public policy executive was soft on the Hindu cause. A Congress party general secretary wrote to Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, demanding "transparency on hate speech." Someone representing "the peace and harmony committee of Delhi Legislative Assembly"—Orwell still reigns as a semantic inspiration in the politics of social justice—wanted to summon senior Facebook management. No need to be alarmed: the parallel universe of social media, swarmed by trolls and traitors, is under attack by the last defenders of truth everywhere, from the US Congress to the Delhi Assembly. This war between the moral relativism of social media and the moral outrage of truth warriors does not redeem morality or truth.

At the outset, we need to concede that the *Journal* report was a fine piece of journalism that brought out the fact that a more vigorous social media content control—internal of course—can contain the hate that kills. The political reaction to the report falls into a pattern perfected in the aftermath of Donald Trump's election in 2016. Those who questioned the legitimacy of his election attributed his victory to the mind controllers from Russian troll farms. They found in Facebook, the favourite medium of data sorcerers, a collaborator, a profiteering ally in the subversion of democracy. Even as moralists and equality activists put it on trial, and even as Twitter began to censor the president, Facebook refused to budge. It has refused to budge even when big advertisers, kneeling to the street in the post-George Floyd America, abandoned it. The progressives and their sympathisers in the media wanted the Facebook chief to be as socially conscious and politically appropriate as the Twitter chief. He doesn't want to be there.

The anger against the new media is born of our fear of the message, its power, its pathologies, and its inauthenticity. It's an old anger; only the nature of the medium has changed. The consumer is also the content provider. There is no passerby here; everyone is a participant, a gene in the ever-expanding media organism. The new media is a declaration of freedom and a struggle for domination. It empowers the ordinary lives outside media elitism; its sewage system feeds the troll. When a politician's Twitter followers exceed the readership of a global newspaper, you know what liberation means, you know what unfiltered power means, and you know what the decoupling of truth and fact means. Every attempt to impose a moral code of conduct on social media smacks of moral dishonesty—and political desperation.

That desperation today demands moral homogeneity, which in turn makes hate speech and free speech interchangeable. In the US, the First Amendment makes it easier to offend, to market hate in the name of freedom, to argue without the safety of metaphors. The progressives and Trump-weary liberals are seeking the state to regulate social media because they expect truth to obey the ideological consensus of the public square. Facebook, in an otherwise liberal ecosystem of Silicon Valley, is a blasphemer, and refuses to be intimidated by the moral dictatorship of the progressives. That is only one part of the story. The other part is: Isn't the distance between free speech and hate speech determined by the impossibility of definitions and the legitimacy of causes? There are moments when the digital troglodyte of religion campaigning for annihilation resembles a cruder version of crusaders "cancelling" out the bad eggs of the revolution. Some freedom fighters occupy the darkest recesses of moral depravity. Some float in the prevailing orthodoxy of freedom. Who will play the judge?

Certainly not the state. A lofty social media is the violation of the very freedom on which the system is built. It is the absence of both hierarchy and curation that makes social media what it is: home to instant evangelists and everyone with a message. The message hurts, divides, subverts, and even kills. It profits the new masters of the universe, the influencers of our impulses. If there is anyone who can—and maybe should—disturb the equality, it is the profiteer. Those who have turned us all into data owe us something in return: if not our lost humanity, at least a restoration of practical morality in the dishonest debate on free speech and digital responsibility. ■

INDRAPRASTHA

Virendra Kapoor

IT WAS ONLY a matter of time before Covid-19 hit nearer home. All along you had felt secure in your presumed invulnerability to the killer virus, having rigorously cocooned yourself in your little world sans all socialising, cutting friends and professional colleagues completely out of your life—hopefully only temporarily. The cook also behaved responsibly, rarely stepping out of the house. As for the *jhadoo-pochha* woman, she was recalled after having been furloughed with full pay for over two months. But it was the old reliable driver who seems to revel in his extended leave of absence. With nowhere to go, his services were not needed anyway. The humdrum daily drill often grated on your mind, but weighing the pros and cons of being virus-free or virus-infected, a concern for life helped you keep your sanity.

Having borne bravely the travails of a highly abnormal life since March 24th, when the first lockdown was imposed, it came as a real shock that a close member of the family who was perhaps far more meticulous in observing the do's and don'ts of Covid-19 than anyone of us, had contracted the virus. Unbeknown to her and anyone else around her, suddenly she felt disoriented, finding it hard to breathe, with her oxygen levels dropping to the mid-80s. Rushed to the hospital, they immediately administered what by now is the standard Covid-19 treatment. A week later, we can report, she is making a slow recovery. Allowed to communicate on phone, minus the voice calls, after the first couple of days, it helps somewhat relieve the misery of lying on your back with all manner of wires and tubes jutting out of your body.

However, the uppermost question in her mind was how, of all the people, she had fallen prey to the virus. It answered itself when the housemaid vamoosed overnight from her quarter. Apparently, finding it hard to stay indoors months on end, the maid had on the sly begun to move around rather freely. After she fell victim to the virus, she left for her village, but not without passing on the infection to her *memsahib*. Meanwhile, everyone in the victim's extended family has had to undertake mandatory tests, observe a strict 10-day home-quarantine and answer the health inspectors from the New Delhi Municipal Corporation, who come visiting regularly to enquire about your state of health. You realise how the authorities are doing a commendable job, contact tracing, enforcing quarantines and generally ensuring that the spread of the virus is kept to the minimum.

Staying on the pandemic, yours truly was virtually forced into shelling out a big packet of money for an oxygen concentrator—just in case. The electrically powered contraption, the size of a mid-sized suitcase, lies in one corner, never used since it was bought a couple of weeks ago. And, hopefully, would not be required at all, though it occurs to me that the oxygen bars at one time were all the rage in the US. They too had a something similar contraption to give the patrons a pleasurable high of breathing pure oxygen—of course, on payment of a small sum of money. The oxygen bars seem to have outlived their appeal, not seen around any longer.

Meanwhile, since the coronavirus eruption, medical equipment merchants are having a bonanza, acting pricey and dictating terms on the make, model and cost of oxygen concentrators, pulse oximeters, full face-visors/shields, etcetera, which the middle-class families feel obliged to invest in for their peace of mind, given the all-enveloping fear of the unfathomable and untreatable virus. Such is the price-gouging in the time of the pandemic that the oximeter that I had bought at the beginning of the pandemic for under Rs 2,000, is now sold at twice the price on the same e-market platform. And to make a quick buck, overnight a number of new manufacturers of hand disinfectants, oximeters, face masks and shields, etcetera, have sprung up.

Greed for money is ingrained in the human mind. The neighbourhood chemist sold plain blue-striped face masks for Rs 50 each in the first few days of the pandemic—now you can freely buy them at Rs 5 apiece. It brings to mind the great Bengal famine when a 'Seth' made so much money from the misery of the dying millions that to salve his guilty conscience in his last days, he founded a college in the capital in his own name. Now, every time the name of the college comes up, it recalls the inhuman profiteering by its founder from the death of the starving millions. ■

MUMBAI NOTEBOOK

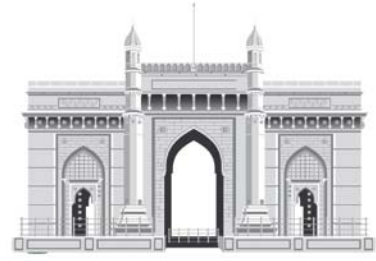
Anil Dharker

FROM A TOWERING 25 ft to a puny 3 ft! What a fall was there, my countrymen, and all due to the cursed coronavirus. Last year's tallest Ganesh idol, the Mahaganpati of Khetwadi, is this time's eco-friendly example to all Ganesh *mandals* of Mumbai who otherwise compete with each other for the title of tallest, grandest, richest and 'popular-est' Ganpati of the year.

Perhaps mandals would have downscaled on their own to cut out the rush of lakhs of jostling devotees who queue up for hours for a *darshan*, or perhaps they wouldn't, except that they had no choice when the Maharashtra government issued a stern directive: No idols above four feet in height. No procession to Mumbai's beaches and its sea for the immersion. No plaster of Paris to be used to make them, only soluble clay. Immersion to be confined to local artificial ponds made for the purpose. *Darshan* to be only online. And the final nail, no cultural programmes every evening before the *aarti*. One *mandal*—the most famous of them all, Lalbaugcha Raja with 8 lakh visitors—announced its substitute: blood and plasma donation.

Blame China, everyone says, for ruining our festivities. Well guess who is paying for this year's drastically reduced celebrations? China! It stopped being a secret a long time ago that most of the lakhs of small plaster of Paris Ganesh idols were made in that country. So Ganesh, the remover of obstacles, has put in a nice big mountain of a barrier right in front of at least one Chinese export machine.

But of course, it's not just the Chinese who are hit hard: Maharashtra's economy is badly affected too. I don't know how authentic these figures are, but if the length of



the organisation's name ensures credibility, we must believe the Sarvojanik Ganeshotsav Samanvay Samiti's estimation of a Rs 5,000 crore Ganesh Utsav economy. Unfortunately, Maharashtra is not just the Ganpati capital of India, it has also become its Covid capital: 30 per cent of India's cases are here, and 45 per cent of fatalities. These are frightening figures, made worse by the near certainty that they are underestimations.

The umbrella organisation for idol-makers says its artisan members have lost Rs 400 crore in all because, to start with, they had already made 70,000 idols of more than 4 feet height before the regulations came in. We might dispute the figures, but not the human tragedy. Other losers are Ganesh *mandals*, over 2,000 registered ones, most of which make money from sponsors with their garish banners and politicians with their self-important pictures. These losses run into crores too.

Every year, the Maharashtra Tourism body sets up a special viewing area erected on the beach at Girgaum Chowpatty for foreign tourists, diplomats and other overseas expats working in Mumbai. It has a glass frontage, air-conditioning, toilets (ah, the relief!) and, specially highlighted, free internet! Sadly, Chowpatty beach will remain just an empty beach this year. Ganesh Festival Tours ('The Original! Beware our copycats!') started organising special coach tours for tourists to all the prominent *mandals* in 2008. They must have prayed hard, but Ganesh has already done his bit with the Chinese, and is now taking a rest.

A WEEK AGO, AT one of our Literature Live! Evenings, I spoke online to two immensely accomplished men, Tom Friedman, triple Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist of *The New York Times* and author of *The World Is Flat*, and Dr Larry Brilliant, one of the world's leading epidemiologists and the man who helped in the eradication of smallpox and polio in India. The conversation made it clear that it's the political leadership that has failed countries. Why is the US, with a population of 330 million, the worst affected? Trump, take a bow. And why in the countries which have done best, it's the scientists who have led the way, while politicians have listened to them and have acted on their advice? Macho, muscular leaders who think they have all the answers, have fared the worst. I asked Dr Brilliant if he had been consulted by Trump and that brought only a wry smile to his face. With his vast experience in India, surely Indian agencies could have taken his advice too, but false pride and chauvinistic nationalism comes in the way.

Look at the way Russia has rushed through its untried vaccine! The sure sign of jingoism is that they have called it Sputnik V, recalling the space race of the 1960s. What is needed is international cooperation against the common unseen enemy. Instead, we have leaders who ride bare-chested and leaders who boast about groping women and leaders who carry tapes to measure their puffed up egos. Dr Brilliant is a true lover of India but he parted with much sadness, saying that we are soon going to top the world in the one way we would have never wanted. ■

OPENINGS

NOTEBOOK

The Free Speech Question

WHEN A BENCH led by Justice Arun Mishra rose on August 20th, after hearing a contempt of court petition against Prashant Bhushan, it was clear that the court had stuck to its guns. It rejected Bhushan's prayer for deferment of sentencing after he was held guilty on August 14th. The court also refused to entertain his plea that a different bench decide on the sentence.

As the proceedings head to a conclusion, a sword hangs over Bhushan's head since the court remains unimpressed by the public campaign mounted in his defence. The court gave Bhushan two days to reconsider his statement. As of now, the lawyer remains unapologetic for the two tweets he made for which the court held him guilty of contempt of court. In a way, the court has displayed remarkable lenience towards him. On August 20th, Justice Mishra said: "There is no person on Earth who cannot commit a mistake. You may do hundreds of good things but that does not give you a licence to do 10 crimes. Whatever has been done is done. But we want the person concerned to have a sense of remorse."

Bhushan apologised for a portion of his tweet on Chief Justice of India (CJI) AS Bobde, riding a Harley Davidson motorcycle. In another tweet, on June 27th, he had said: 'When historians in future look back at the last 6 years to see how democracy has been destroyed in India even without a formal Emergency, they will particularly mark the role of the Supreme Court in this destruction, & more particularly the role of the last 4 CJIs.'

The court, in a 108-page judgment, analysed the law of contempt at length and Bhushan's tweets. When it became obvious that the judges were in no mood to ignore Bhushan's transgression, a campaign of sorts was mounted to save him. A number of arguments were made in op-eds, letters and statements. Most rested on the alleged 'destruction of democracy' and the 'chilling effect' his sentencing would have on free speech. Barring one technical argument—that the consent of the Attorney General was not taken as was required under Rule 3 of the Rules to Regulate Proceedings for Contempt of the Supreme Court, 1975—everything else was about freedom of speech. The consent issue was explained at length by the court in its judgment and was not considered an impediment in proceeding against Bhushan.

That is where the substantive issues around the case come to an end. The judicial system has a chain of appeals—starting from the lower courts all the way to the Supreme Court—in case a person feels he has not received justice. Even in the apex court, there is a provision to file a review petition, a highly unusual remedy since once the court delivers a judgment, it is binding, there being no further court for appeal. Bhushan has chosen to opt for a review petition but that is where there is a twist in the story.

On August 20th, Bhushan through his lawyer not only sought deferment of sentencing by the bench led by Justice Mishra but also sought that the sentencing be carried out by a different bench. (Justice Mishra is set to retire in early September.) This was as good as expressing a lack of confidence in the Justice Mishra bench. For anyone familiar with the working of the judicial system, this is as good as trying to pick a bench for hearing one's case. In the event, the court rejected this outrageous demand.

This extraordinary demand should be seen against the background of events of the past years. Since the *Supreme Court Advocates on Record Association versus the Union of India* case of 2015 that held the National Judicial Appointments Commission (NJAC) to be unconstitutional, an impression has been created that the judiciary is allegedly 'deferential' to the executive. It is another matter that after that period, there have been a number of instances where judicial decisions—from high courts to the apex court—have gone against the Union and state governments. What has changed is the inability of certain lawyers to get decisions of their liking in many politically sensitive cases. This has been interpreted—as Bhushan did in his second tweet—as the judiciary weakening democracy in India. The court rightly noted this as an 'attack' on the Supreme Court

The attempt at mobilising public opinion against the court and statements by 'eminent' lawyers and retired judges were not about pointing out mistakes made by the court but forcing it to let Prashant Bhushan off the hook. That the court stuck to its guns preserves its ability to dispense justice impartially and does not undermine it

Illustration by **SAURABH SINGH**

that could lead to "A possibility of the other judges getting an impression that they may not stand protected from malicious attacks, when the Supreme Court has failed to protect itself from malicious insinuations, cannot be ruled out." The court concluded: "As such, in order to protect the larger public interest, such attempts of attack on the highest judiciary of the country should be dealt with firmly."

The case raises an important question: Can freedom of speech be used to mount an attack on an institution which is the ultimate protector of free speech? The bench led by Justice Mishra expressed the fear that this is indeed the case. In contrast, Bhushan—through his tweets, his submissions in the contempt case and his refusal to apologise to the court—thinks otherwise.

No institution can survive unless it allows criticism against itself. Otherwise mistakes and course correction will become impossible. India's Supreme Court certainly allows ample criticism. So far, there has been not a single instance when fair criticism of the court has led to punishment under contempt of court. Analysis of infirmities in judicial decisions is a regular feature in the Indian press and TV debates. What has happened in Bhushan's case is far removed from all this. The attempt at mobilising public opinion against the court and statements by 'eminent' lawyers and retired judges were not about pointing out mistakes made by the court but forcing it to let Bhushan off the hook. That the court stuck to its guns preserves its ability to dispense justice impartially and does not undermine it. What makes it remarkable is that the three judges stuck to their decision despite intense outside pressure to abandon it. Famous lawyers—whatever be their record in trying to secure justice—are just like any other individual before the court. Trouble begins when such individuals forget that and think they are on a different footing. What Bhushan sought on August 20th—deferment of sentencing and sentencing to be carried out by a different bench—conveys that message clearly.

All this is in contrast to another recent contempt case—that of CS Karnan—a serving judge of the Calcutta High Court. He was convicted of contempt of court in May 2017 and had to serve a six-month prison term. At that time, there was near unanimity that Karnan deserved to be punished. Many—including Bhushan—held that his conviction was right. At that time, there were no op-eds in support of Karnan—a Dalit—that said freedom of speech was endangered or that the punishment meted out to him was unfair.

For a long time, during which the executive was weak due to a fractured political landscape, the apex court and the high courts stepped in and sorted out a number of issues, ranging from environment protection to a vast expansion of fundamental rights by interpretation, tasks that originally belonged to the executive and the legislature. Since the NJAC judgment, a re-equilibration of sorts is on, one in which the court is an active participant and not a mute spectator as has been alleged. While the process is on, certain influential lawyers think that they can continue getting the court to intervene in matters where the executive has filled in the earlier gap. The Bhushan case is a small manifestation of this overall process. ■

By SIDDHARTH SINGH

IN MEMORIAM • PANDIT JASRAJ (1930-2020)

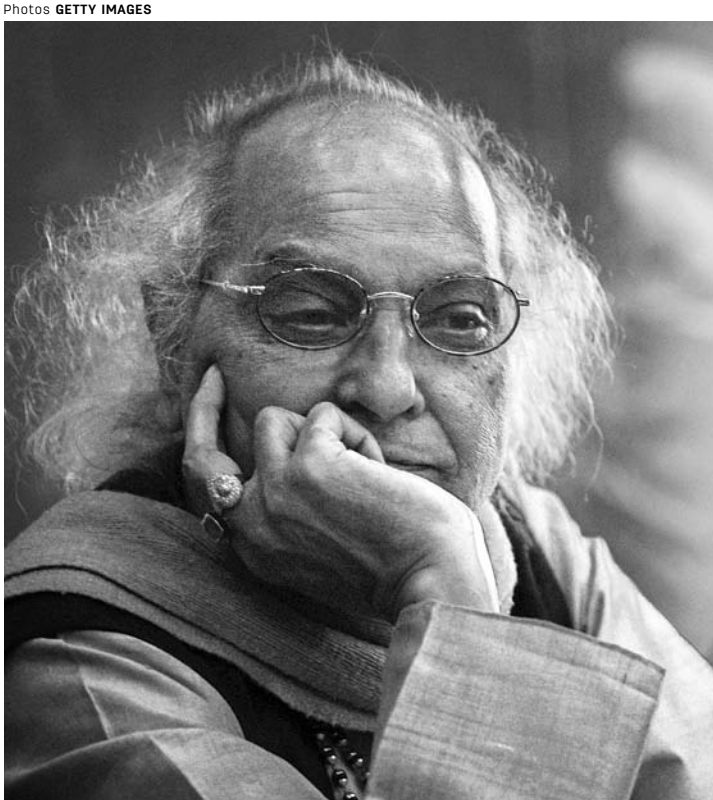
EVERYONE'S MUSICIAN

A genre-bender who made Hindustani classical music an accessible, emotional experience

"OF THE MEN who dream of a wedding, few ever get to wear the *sehra*—the wedding garland—and fewer still manage to look good." Pandit Jasraj's disciples were familiar with his aphorisms, but what made this piece of advice hit home was the fact that it was coming from one of India's most popular concert musicians. As much as artistic prestige and technical rigour, it was the audience that animated Panditji's music. As someone who performed for the crowd, constantly gauging, creating and reacting to the mood, he dressed the part of a groom on stage, not tolerating a wrinkle in his dhoti or a shabby kurta, no more than he would an errant note by an accompanist. Pandit Jasraj wasn't just gifted with one of the best voices of his era, he also strived to be everyone's musician—someone who could sing an *alaap* so cavernous, you would need years of training to shine a flashlight into its deepest secrets; bhajans that were hitherto not considered serious music; a more lively and accessible avatar of the *khayal*; intricate *bandishes* of his own that would allow him to span many octaves. There was no question of retirement. So when Pandit Jasraj died on August 17th, aged 90, of cardiac arrest in his New Jersey home, we did not just lose the last of the greats, we also lost one of the first musicians to inspire the world of Indian classical music to be people-facing.

"He lived in the moment and always knew what to do, what to say. I remember playing with him at the late Atal Bihari Vajpayee's 80th birthday. Panditji was singing *Bhairavi* when the then Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, walked in. In an instant, he launched into *Gurbani* and Mr Singh could not contain his joy," says Shashank Subramanyam, a Carnatic flautist and a long-time disciple of Pandit Jasraj. "I spoke to him over video four days ago. He wasn't ready to hang up his boots; in fact, he was preparing to resume video classes in a week's time," Subramanyam says.

Photos GETTY IMAGES



The Hisar, Haryana-born musician first trained in the tabla under his elder brother Pandit Pratap Narayan, father of the music director duo Jatin-Lalit, and turned vocalist under the tutelage of his elder brother Maniram. Emerging as the most prominent exponent of the Mewati gharana—and of Hindustani music—Pandit Jasraj acknowledged the impact of Begum Akhtar's, Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan's and Ustad Amir Khan's music on his own aesthetics. He in turn redefined the sound of the Mewati gharana, making the art of *meend*, the lovely bridge between *swaras* that lies at the heart of melody and *bhava*, its watermark. Panditji also developed an abiding respect for diction that is absent in many a classicist tradition. "He was a complete musician, exploiting the entire range of his voice, and cavorting with rhythm, *sargam*, *layakari* and *meend* to achieve a non-monotonous sound. If you listen to a three-hour concert of his, you would find as much *aa-kar* as *i-kar* and *u-kar*," says Sanjeev Abhyankar, the torchbearer of the Mewati gharana after Pandit Jasraj, who often referred to him as "our Sunil Gavaskar".

In the 1970s, Pandit Jasraj's music was not quite as soulful and devotional as we know it today. "When I listen to records from the 1970s, when he himself was in his 40s, his music seems to be more aggressive, restless and romantic. Later—I have known him since 1983—his music became more spiritual and inward-looking, more so with age," says Abhyankar. "Devotion was a big part of his life. Anywhere he went, he would visit temples and sit down in a corner and start singing," says Subramanyam, who remembers an impromptu session at the Kalighat temple. In fact, his devotion for the goddess Kali seems to have shaped his deep respect for women artists like MS Subbulakshmi and Rukmini Devi Arundale, whom he spoke of in reverential terms. Panditji would go on to mentor generations of musicians, many of them women, including Anuradha Paudwal, Kala Ramnath and Sadhna Sargam.

Panditji forged connections with Carnatic musicians like the late M Balamuralikrishna and the mridangist Sridhar Parthasarathy who routinely accompanied him for years. It is not easy to reconcile the man who is said to have summoned the rain with a monsoon raga, with the image of a modern-day genre bender. He was both, and more. ■

By V SHOBA

ANGLE

DON'T GET YOUR FACTS RIGHT

Biopics like *Gunjan Saxena* are not meant to be anything more than fiction

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

A *BEAUTIFUL MIND*, the biopic of the mathematician John Nash, was as inspiring a movie as one could see. It traces Nash's descent into schizophrenia and then his redemption through an act of will using reason, almost thinking his incurable ailment away. In one scene, he tells his wife he has recognised delusion for what it is because a boy that his mind had conjured up for years just does not grow up. That begins his return to a functional normalcy culminating in him getting the Nobel Prize. However, on reading the book on which the movie was based some years later, I realised that none of it was true. As people age, their schizophrenia often mellows down, which was probably the extent of Nash's miracle. What made the filmmaker change the story so drastically that it became fiction? The same reason why the just released Netflix movie *Gunjan Saxena*, which has got furious reactions from the defence community for tampering with the truth, did it. Real life is often not dramatic enough to fill up a movie.

Gunjan Saxena, played by Jhanvi Kapoor, showed the men in the Air Force actively hounding the first woman to purportedly enter the service and fly combat missions during the Kargil War. The problem the filmmakers faced is that they had almost no material beyond this one line. And so everything had to exaggerated or created, from a soldier brother constantly trying to thwart her flying ambitions to a superior in the Air Force out to get her off the service. Why have such characters unless there was an absence of real obstacles that could be depicted on screen?

What is, however, puzzling is the outrage against it, or the expectation that movies must be responsible to truth. It is, after all, not a documentary. Plus, such an obsession with the truth is never seen when it is fiction that makes one glad. In the movie *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*, for example, where Milkha Singh broke a world record. An article in *The Pioneer* at the time wrote: 'But to claim that he broke the world record, as the film does, was ludicrous. The [Singh's] autobiography helps put the fact right... As per *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*, Singh made a new world record of 45.8 seconds just before the 1960 Olympics. Call it lack of research or a deliberate attempt to distort facts, but when Singh ran in 'record' time, the world record mark had actually changed. The book safely—and rightly—credits him with bettering the previous Olympic record.' Or all the historical movies, from *Manikarnika* to *Padmaavat* to the numerous biopics of freedom fighters, that scratches the nationalist itch. They are never put under the microscope for truth value.

Even *Gunjan Saxena* aspires for political correctness except that it did so in the service of gender. The reason it fell out of favour was it vilified the defence forces. For all future biopic makers in India, the lesson here is to first figure out which political correctness is more politically correct at the moment. ■

IDEAS

OPPORTUNITY

Covid-19 may have ruptured economies but it has also come as an opportunity for a select few. Most notably, big tech or the so-called GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Microsoft). These tech Goliaths had been growing steadily but the pandemic has accelerated the process. Apple recently became only the second company in history to breach the $2 trillion market cap. The Saudi government-backed Saudi Aramco had briefly been valued this much. It had taken Apple 42 years and all of Steve Jobs' revolutionary products to reach $1 trillion in 2018. It took just two years to breach the $2 trillion mark, most of the rise occurring in the last five months. This is remarkable when you consider that Apple hasn't come up with any groundbreaking device in the way it did under Jobs. It has simply tweaked old devices and pushed itself into services. The rise in valuation isn't limited just to Apple. The valuation of all GAFAM has soared during the pandemic, to almost about $3 trillion. ■

WORD'S WORTH

'Never miss out on an opportunity like a good recession'

JACK WELCH
FORMER CEO, GENERAL ELECTRIC

By Makarand R Paranjape

The Gandhi Purana

The metaphysical boldness of Raja Rao's portrait of the Mahatma

RAJA RAO'S FABULOUS retelling of Mahatma Gandhi's life, *The Great Indian Way: A Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, is about to be republished, with a new, 50-page introduction, which I have written. (First published by Kapil Malhotra of Vision Books in 1998, the book's new edition published by Penguin Random House is scheduled to be released in September. Portions of this column have appeared in my 'Introduction'.) Rao had called it 'an experiment in honesty', adding that the 'Pauranic style... is the only style an Indian can use'. This marvellous recitation of Bapu's life in the form of a modern Purana is probably the most exciting literary tribute to Gandhi as his sesquicentennial anniversary celebrations draw to a somewhat tepid close.

My mind goes back to a memorable one-day symposium, 'Word as Mantra: The Art of Raja Rao', on March 24, 1997 at the University of Texas in Austin, US. Rao had taught philosophy from 1966 to 1986 and then settled into a quiet, private retirement with his third wife, Susan, in their small, rented apartment on Pearl Street, not too far from the campus.

I remember sitting on the wooden floor at Raja Rao's feet, while he reclined comfortably on his bed. Rao was a small, distinguished-looking man, with fine features, aquiline nose and longish, unkempt white hair. He was just a year short of 90, but his eyes were full of sparkle. He seemed the very embodiment of life and light. He spoke to me softly, almost in a whisper, yet his mind was razorsharp, capable of the most abstruse ideas and complex conversations.

I was part of a small group of admirers and scholars who were there to felicitate him on being conferred the Fellowship of the Sahitya Akademi, India's national academy of letters. The Fellowship is its highest form of recognition, usually given to our most eminent writers for a lifetime's contribution to literature.

Rao's award was announced the previous year, in 1996, but he was unable to travel to India to receive it. Now, the then President of the Sahitya Akademi, himself one of India's great writers, UR Ananthamurthy, had come all the way to Austin to bestow it upon Rao. The ceremony had already taken place earlier in the day at the Center for Asian Studies in the university, along with the symposium in Rao's honour organised by Bob Hardgrave, his former colleague.

In my presentation earlier in the day, 'Seeing with Three Eyes: Raja Rao and the Gandhian Way', I had tried to unravel the mystery of Raja Rao's Gandhi. Given the hundreds of books on the Mahatma, what was so special about Raja Rao's biography? Why had Mulk Raj Anand called it 'among the most authentic accounts of the Mahatma's life and work'?

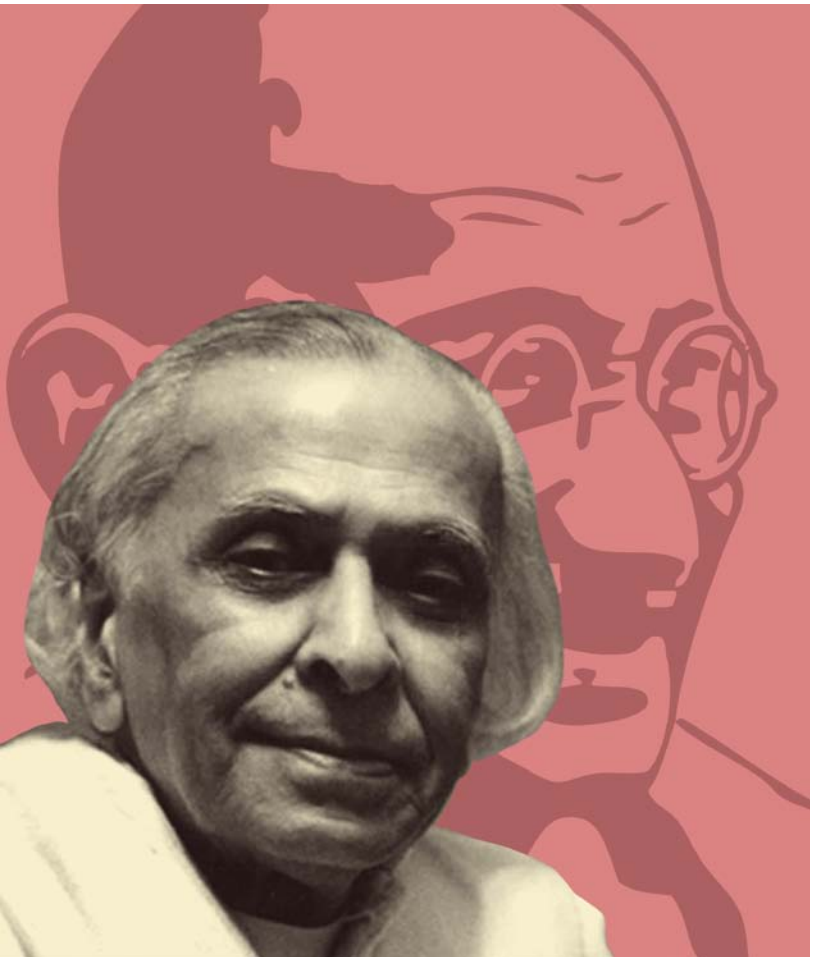
The clue came from Rao himself: 'Facts of course are there, but facts are shrill.' Facts, in other words, do not tell the whole truth: 'They have a way of saying more than they mean, and disbelievingly so. The silences and the symbols are omitted, and meaning taken out of breath and performance.'

What else do we have other than facts? Rao calls it the 'rasa, flavour, to makes facts melt into life'. Complex and multilayered, requiring a special style to express it, even in modern times, 'the Indian experience is such a palimpsest, layer behind layer of tradition and myth and custom go to make such an existence: gesture is ritual, and each act a statement in terms of philosophy, superstition, historical or linguistic provincialism, caste originality, or merely a person alone, and yet it's all a whole, it's India.'

Something similar Rao had declared in the 'Preface' to his first novel, *Kanthapura*: 'We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. Our method of expression... has to be a dialect which will someday prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish and the American. Time alone will justify it.' This statement became almost the manifesto of Indian writing in English, foretelling the chutneyfication of English by later experimenters such as Salman Rushdie.

Speaking of his own experience in writing about India, Rao had admitted, 'The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own, the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language.' Of course, English is not entirely an alien language to Indians but, as Rao believed, it is not the language of our 'emotional make-up'. That is how he came to create a new style, a new mode of narration.

Illustration by **SAURABH SINGH**



GIVEN THE HUNDREDS OF BOOKS ON THE MAHATMA, WHAT WAS SO SPECIAL ABOUT RAJA RAO'S BIOGRAPHY? WHY HAD MULK RAJ ANAND CALLED IT 'AMONG THE MOST AUTHENTIC ACCOUNTS OF THE MAHATMA'S LIFE AND WORK'? THE CLUE CAME FROM RAO HIMSELF: 'FACTS OF COURSE ARE THERE, BUT FACTS ARE SHRILL'

In his book on Gandhi, Rao takes his experimentation to a new level of stylistic and metaphysical boldness: 'Thus to face honesty against an Indian event, an Indian life, one's expression has to be epic in style or to lie.' In other words, facts alone cannot tell the Indian story, nor can myths, rituals or fables by themselves.

That is how Rao reinvented the *pauranic* style. Not in the manner of the old Puranas which, from the point of modern history, are hobbled by their unverifiable material. Nor the contemporary accounts which are slaves to facts. But a unique combination of both.This I called 'seeing with three eyes'.

The first eye sees only facts. The second espies the fable behind and around the fact. It is only the third eye, the eye of wisdom, that can combine both to see into the depths of things, their secret significance and meaning. This special way of seeing is what Rao calls 'fact against custom, history against time... geography against space'.

In his book on the Mahatma, this is precisely what Rao accomplishes, making 'life larger than it seems, and its small impurities and accidents and parts, must perforce be transmuted into equations where the mighty becomes normal, and the normal in its turn becoming myth. Prose and poetry thus flow into one another, the personal and the impersonal, making the drama altogether noble and simple.'

The cancel culture and Black Lives Matter (BLM) movements have not spared Gandhi. Along with other notables such as Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill, Gandhi's statues were also desecrated on both sides of the Atlantic, in both Washington DC and London. In March 2016, a 9ft bronze statue of the Mahatma had been unveiled in Parliament Square, London, by the late Arun Jaitley, then Finance Minister, in the presence of then UK Prime Minister David Cameron. That statue was defaced with the expletive 'racist' on the its foundation and spray painted in white by protesters on June 8th.

But Gandhi, as Raja Rao, himself often reiterated, belongs very much to a *pauranic* tradition which cannot easily be disfigured or disregarded. Rao himself told me that on the eve of Independence, he and a few close friends were desperately looking for a miracle that might avert the partition of India. They thought a true sage might, through an act of supreme sacrifice, avert it. Instead, Gandhi, the Father of the Nation, himself was assassinated. Rao said, 'Sadly, it was too late. Gandhi died to save India from going up in flames. It was, at best, a desperate, last-ditch effort, after most of the damage had already been done.'

To Rao, it was Gandhi, more than anyone else, who represented the integrity of the non-dual that India stands for. That is what Gandhi wanted to realise in his idea of Ram Rajya and *swaraj*. But the oneness of Hindus and Muslims that he gave his life for could not be accomplished, nor the horrors of partition averted.

The Great Indian Way is Rao's retelling of and tribute to Gandhi's extraordinary life. ■

POLITICS BECKONING?

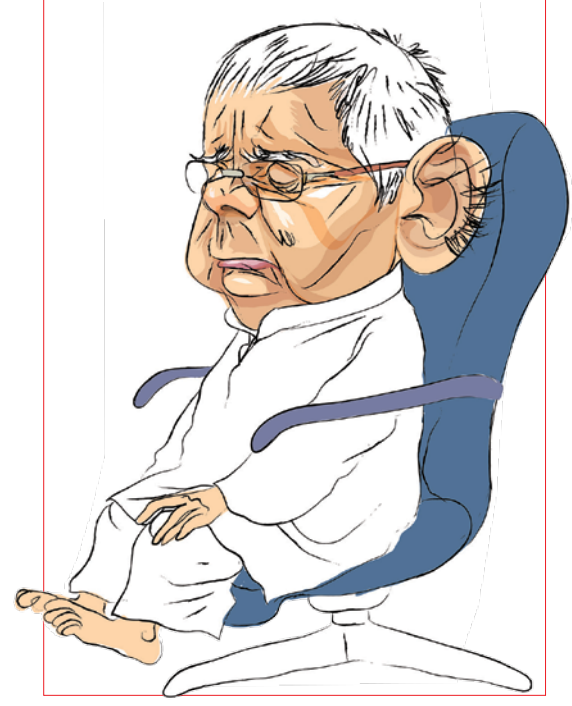
An old speculation that has now reared its head again is whether Mahendra Singh Dhoni will join the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) now that he has formally announced his retirement from international cricket. In the 2019 General Election, the BJP had wanted him as a campaigner but Dhoni declined. Party workers from different states are keen on getting Dhoni. He is originally from Uttarakhand but raised in Jharkhand. Both state units would want him. Former Jharkhand Deputy Chief Minister Sudesh Mahto of All Jharkhand Students Union party too might want to co-opt him. There is even a call for him from Chennai as he represented their IPL team. Another rumour is that his wife Sakshi could contest the next Lok Sabha elections in 2024 from Ranchi.

LATE HONOUR

Some bureaucrats are urging the Government to give a national film award to Sushant Singh Rajput, who allegedly committed suicide recently. This would, in their reckoning, mollify his fans who are upset. But Information & Broadcasting Minister Prakash Javadekar argued that any award would be the decision of the jury and not the Government. But any Indian citizen can send a proposal to the jury.

Covid Respite

The pandemic has come as a respite for Lalu Prasad. He has been serving a jail sentence but, for health reasons, had been at AIIMS in Delhi and Rajendra Institute of Medical Sciences (RIMS) in Ranchi. But after Covid-19 struck, keeping his age in mind, he has been put up at the RIMS hospital director's bungalow. There are fewer security personnel and restrictions on meeting people are more lax. With the Bihar Assembly elections approaching, Lalu Prasad now seems to have more freedom to get into campaign strategy and the selection of candidates.



Illustrations by **SAURABH SINGH**

Pawar Play

In the Pawar family, a rift has begun and at the centre of it seems to be Parth, Ajit Pawar's son and Sharad Pawar's grand-nephew. Parth had lost the last election and there is a possibility that he is gravitating towards the BJP. He has started making statements not toeing the Nationalist Congress Party line. When Sharad Pawar said that instead of Ram Mandir, the battle against Covid should be top priority, Parth publicly stated that the temple construction was also important. His father, Ajit, is also said to be in touch with the BJP. Recently, at a family dinner where Sharad Pawar wasn't present, his daughter Supriya Sule apparently asked Ajit to control his son.

Holy Compromise

On the day of the *bhoomipuja* for the Ram temple, where Prime Minister Narendra Modi was present, a large team of priests from Varanasi also came to perform rites. They chanted "*Har Har Mahadev*", a tradition of theirs, as homage to Shiva. Priests from Ayodhya, meanwhile, responded with "*Jai Shri Ram*", a homage to Vishnu whose avatar Ram is. It seemed like a rekindling of the old Shaivite-Vaishnavite discord but both groups resolved it by agreeing that there was no conflict between Shiva and Vishnu.

Waiting for Ministership

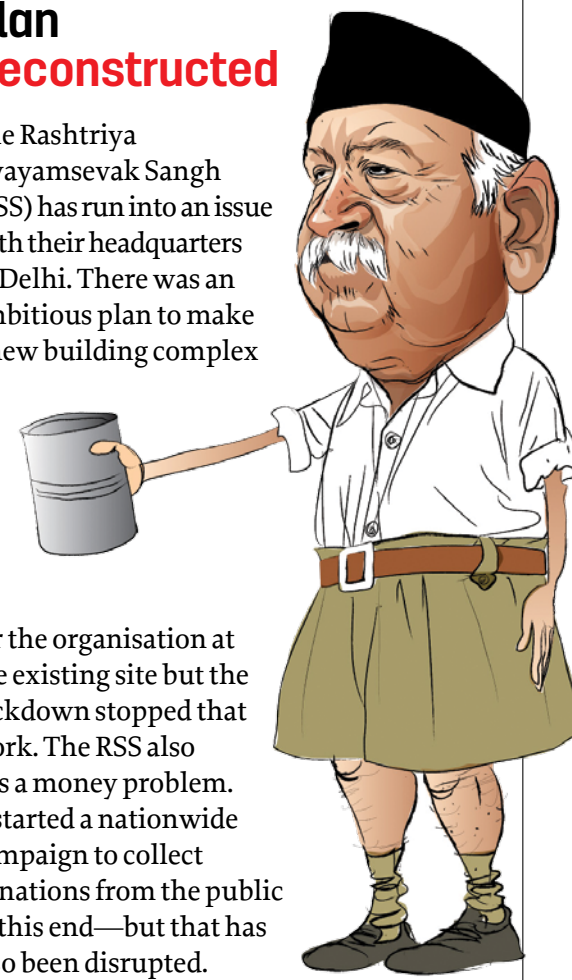
Jyotiraditya Scindia, even though he became Rajya Sabha member after switching over to the BJP, is getting restless because he is yet to be made a minister, which was also said to be part of the deal. But Cabinet expansion and reshuffle are the Prime Minister's prerogative and Modi will do it on his own time. No one else knows whether Scindia will be inducted as part of a larger expansion or if it will be an individual case. Meanwhile, there will be by-elections to 27 Assembly seats for those who resigned from the Congress at Scindia's behest, and his team is saying that if he is not made a minister, it may impact the results.

Peace Talk?

Pakistan's diplomats are broadly happy with Modi's Independence Day speech because he said that the Government is keen to hold Assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir soon. It meant that the status of the Union Territory is temporary and that statehood will return. Although Pakistan is against statehood too, officially they think it sends a positive signal. Modi also talked about peace in South Asia, which too found favour with the Pakistanis.

Plan Deconstructed

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) has run into an issue with their headquarters in Delhi. There was an ambitious plan to make a new building complex for the organisation at the existing site but the lockdown stopped that work. The RSS also has a money problem. It started a nationwide campaign to collect donations from the public to this end—but that has also been disrupted.



SINHA SURPRISE

The announcement making Manoj Sinha lieutenant governor of Jammu & Kashmir was sudden. Sinha had been in Varanasi when the Prime Minister called him—and the very next day he went over to take charge. Some think Modi achieved multiple objectives. Outgoing Lt Governor GC Murmu, a retired IAS officer, had not had a good relationship with the bureaucracy. Thus, a political appointment would perhaps be more workable. Sinha, who had been a Central minister, had been defeated in the last Lok Sabha elections. But Modi liked him and was keen on using his services. Also, Kashmiris would reportedly prefer a political appointment so that a dialogue could begin again.

By SRINIVAS REDDY

THE TREE OF LIFE

Community lessons from the plant kingdom

paropakārāya phalanti vṛkṣāḥ paropakārāya vahanti nadyaḥ /
paropakārāya duhanti gāvaḥ paropakārārtham idaṃ śarīram //

Trees bear fruit, and cows offer milk
for the welfare of all beings,
just as rivers flow in constant service
to all things beyond themselves.
And like them, the purpose of our bodies
is to serve others.

—Sanskrit proverb

THE NOTION OF selfless action is fundamental to all Indian philosophical traditions, be they Hindu, Buddhist or Jain. This is because the self (*ātman*) and action (karma) are the two most discussed and debated concepts in the 2,000-plus-year-old history of Indian speculation into the nature of the universe and our unique place within it. The ancients were deeply rooted in their natural surroundings. They understood seasonal cycles, tracked the movement of the sun and moon, propitiated the spirits of Nature for a good harvest and honoured trees with songs and dance. There was a mutual respect between humans and Nature; and it was born of a visceral, lived understanding of our codependent interconnectedness.

In Harappan times, some 4,000 plus years ago, we find clear evidence that the ancient people of the Indian subcontinent respected Nature in multiple ways. One Harappan clay seal depicts a majestic peepal tree with heart-shaped leaves and widespreading branches. As Sir John Marshall, Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India from 1902 to 1928, asserted: 'The plant... has been identified as the pipal tree, which in India is the Tree of Creation. The arrangement is very conventional and from the lower part of its stem spring two heads similar to those of the so-called unicorn' (*Mohenjo-Daro and the Indus Civilisation*, Volume II, 1931, p 390). This fascinating image of a peepal tree seems to grow in tandem with the heads of two horselike creatures. Without straying into the thorny debates surrounding the indigeneity of the horse in India (see 'The Horse and the Aryan Debate' by Michel Danino in *Journal of Indian History and Culture*, 2006 and 'Stallions of the Indian Ocean' by Srinivas Reddy in *Exploring Materiality and Connectivity in Anthropology and Beyond* edited by Philipp Schorch, Martin Saxer and Marlen Elders, 2020), suffice it to say that the Harappans recognised, appreciated and honoured the fact that humans, animals and plants were all joined in one holistic ecosystem.

In later Vedic literature, almost all the authorless hymns to the gods invoke an element of the natural world. Each deity, or 'luminous one' (*deva*), is an aspect of this biodiversity. Agni (fire), Indra (rain), Vāyu (wind), Ūṣā (dawn) and Soma (moon) are just a few of the examples of how the Vedic people sublimated themselves to Nature's awesome power, not as fearful and passive savages, but as

An Indus Valley Civilisation seal from Mohenjodaro depicting a peepal tree and unicorns

Illustration by **SAURABH SINGH**

THE PEEPAL TREE, THIS ANCIENT INDIAN TREE OF LIFE, IS ONE ELEMENT OF INDIAN CULTURE THAT HAS PERSISTED FOR MILLENNIA. GRANTED OUR PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE TREES HAS CHANGED OVER TIME, BUT THEN AGAIN, NOTHING IN THIS LIFE IS STABLE; AND EVERY OLD TREE ON THIS PLANET IS A LIVING GURU OF THAT PRIMORDIAL TRUTH

intelligent and creative people in a natureloving society. Arguably the most famous Vedic hymn today is the Gāyatrī Mantra which is a praise poem to Savitur, the sun. Of course, we do not readily think of it that way today and often recite it as an auspicious poem that inspires clear thinking (*dhīmahi dhiyoyonaḥ pracodayāt*). As Sri Aurobindo eloquently writes: 'The Rishis adopted the phenomena of physical Nature as just symbols for those functionings of the inner life... It was their difficult task to indicate in the concrete language of a sacred poetry that must at the same time serve for the external worship of the Gods as powers of the visible universe. The solar energy is the physical form of Surya, Lord of Light and Truth' (*The Secret of the Veda*, p 289). This holistic interpretation of the Vedic corpus allows us to understand how a 'purely naturalistic' system evolved into 'an increasingly ethical and psychological view of Nature' (*The Secret of the Veda*, p 92). In other words, Sri Aurobindo is describing a very logical connection between Vedic natureworship and Upaniṣadic metaphysics.

The Upaniṣads are deep philosophical reflections into the nature of reality as presented by countless wise sages. These spiritual teachers often taught in secluded forests (*araṇyas*), hence the texts known as the Āraṇyakas or Forest Books. More generally the Upaniṣads are so named because they were teachings imparted under the cooling shade of a tree. The guru would sit under a tree of wide girth and students would gather to 'sit down around' ('*upa*' + '*ni*' + root '*ṣad*') and absorb the teachings.

During this period of intellectual ferment, two other traditions evolved in South Asia: Buddhism and Jainism. Although these two new faiths shared many terms, concepts and metaphysical underpinnings with Hinduism, both Buddhists and Jains were different in that they rejected Vedic authority, promoted vegetarianism (*ahimsa*) and preached that personal striving (*śrama*), not ritual action (*yajña*), leads to liberation. The codependence of Nature and humanity is a central concept in both these so-called 'heterodox' schools; and it derives directly from a deep philosophical understanding that all beings are interconnected and dependent upon each other. This holistic view of human life is a natural extension of Buddhist/Jain discourse on the nature of reality. In Buddhism the concept is known as *pratītyasamutpāda* or dependent co-origination, while in Jainism it is summarised by a famous aphorism from the Tattvārtha Sūtra of Umāsvati: '*parasparopagrahojivānām* [all beings are mutually connected]'. At a ceremony commemorating the 2,500th anniversary of Mahavira's attainment of complete knowledge (*kevala-jñāna*), this sutra was adopted by all sects of Jainism as the central message of Mahavira's philosophy.

Without moving into later developments like the Purāṇas (around 200 BCE and after), Hinduism writ large, in conversation with Buddhism, Jainism and other schools of thought, developed multiple ways of living that harmonised human development with a respect for Nature. If we look at this ancient period of human history from the trees' perspective, we begin to see how rapidly human existence on this planet has shaped and transformed them—and most often for the worse. Harappans were city dwellers, longdistance traders and innovators, but by all accounts, they maintained a cooperative relationship with their natural environment. The Vedic people were thought to have been nomadic, they didn't even have fixed settlements or permanent structures, both clear stepping stones in the relentless march of human civilisation. But this ostensible human progress is concomitant with a distancing of humanity from Nature; a separation which makes it all the easier for humans to extract and exploit natural resources. Seeing our interconnectedness and interdependence with Nature engenders respect and admiration, while seeing Nature as 'Other' promotes feelings of arrogance, power and condescension.

Post-Harappan settlements in the Yamuna-Ganga *doab* promoted agriculture, trade and city building. In this phase, humans slowly started to use and abuse natural resources, taking from Nature at will, as if it were a god-given right, and rarely giving anything back in return. The ensuing centuries, leading up to the present, witnessed great advancements in human creativity and ingenuity, but our overinflated sense of progress wrought incalculable damage upon our Mother Earth. We have forgotten that we are not separate from Nature, we are not her master; if anything, she is ours. The current Covid-19 pandemic is but one small example of how the earth is reminding us to slow down, take a breath and relish in the joy of Nature's sublime intelligence. One reason why we continue to abuse the planet is that we no longer see her as a person, as a living entity; but that is what the earth is: a tiny blue-green sphere in space teeming with billions of lifeforms. When we remember that trees are living, feeling beings, it becomes easy to treat them with respect. Would any one of us ever strike our mothers or pollute her in any way? Of course not! She is our mother and we respect her. But Nature is our Great Mother. Should we not afford that same kindness and high regard to her?

RECENT SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH is slowly convincing a science-obsessed society that trees are people too. Certainly, the peepal tree is! This ancient Indian Tree of Life is one element of Indian culture that has persisted for millennia. Granted our personal relationships with the trees has changed over time, but then again, nothing in this life is stable; and every old tree on this planet is a living guru of that primordial truth. Chapter XV of the Bhagavad Gita, known as 'Puruṣottama Yoga' (the Yoga of the Supreme Self), begins with a description of a giant peepal tree with it roots above (*ūrdhvamūlam*) and branches below (*adhaḥśākham*). This tree is known as the Aśvattha Tree and its etymology sheds light not only on the essence of the venerable tree, but also on the nature of Indian thought, namely, an Indian epistemology rooted in an underlying principle of the unity of all life. As Swami Chidbhavananda explains, 'The tree is both a symbol and an entity revealing life. It aids the study of life in all its aspects...' (the Bhagavad Gita with translation and commentary, p 750).

According to the celebrated 9th century theologian Sankara, the word *aśvattha* means 'that which is not today as it was yesterday'. His derivation is ('*a*' + '*śvas*' + root '*sthā*'), that is the negative particle '*a*' with '*śvas*' (tomorrow) and root '*sthā*' (the standing, or that which remains). This reading illuminates the Aśvattha's mutability and dynamism. On the other hand, the term can also be derived thus: ('*a*' + root '*śvac*' + root '*stha*'), that is the negative particle '*a*' with root '*śvac*' (moving) and root '*sthā*' (stable). And so, the Aśvattha also represents rootedness and stability. This kind of multi-derivational logic is an important quality of the Indian episteme, namely that plural-

SEEING OUR INTERCONNECTEDNESS AND INTERDEPENDENCE WITH NATURE ENGENDERS RESPECT AND ADMIRATION, WHILE SEEING NATURE AS 'OTHER' PROMOTES FEELINGS OF ARROGANCE, POWER AND CONDESCENSION

ity of thought is essential to any human understanding. The Jaina philosophy of *anekāntavāda*, or the Doctrine of Multi-Perspectiveness, best summarises this fundamental epistemic axiom. Often this concept is expressed by the story in which several blind men grasp at different parts of a giant elephant and try to guess what it really is. One holds a leg and says it's a tree; another grabs the trunk and says it's a giant snake; a third rubs an ear only to think it's an oversize fan; and so on. Like this, all of us modern humans are grasping blindly at the wide world around us, constantly assuming the part to be whole, forever placing ourselves above Nature and repeatedly arriving at false perceptions (*mithyādṛṣṭi*).

NOT ALL TREES ARE THE SAME, OR IN ORWELLIAN TERMS, 'ALL TREES ARE EQUAL, BUT SOME TREES ARE MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS.' AND THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT WE FIND IN THE PLANT KINGDOM, ALBEIT AS AN EXPRESSION OF COMPASSION RATHER THAN HIERARCHY

Much of modernity, based as it is on a very narrow scientific epistemology, has blinded us to our deep and multifaceted connections to Mother Earth. When we begin to remember that all the creatures of the planet are part of our extended family, we begin to change our outlook on life and our treatment of the environment. Now even modern science is slowly, slowly, coming around to shed light on these simple truths.

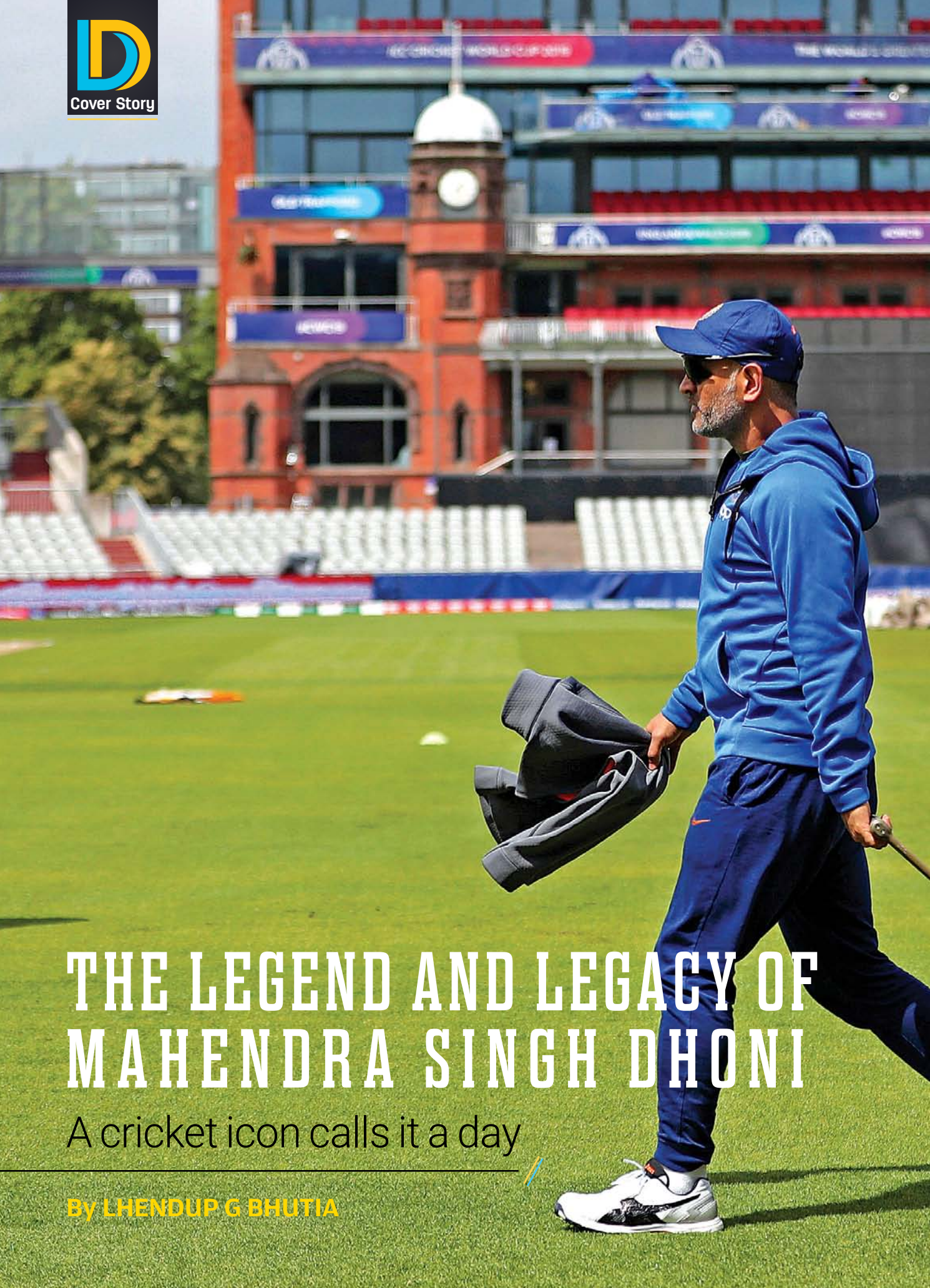
One of my all-time favorite books is *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate—Discoveries from a Secret World* by German forester and author Peter Wohlleben. In simple, beautiful language Wohlleben takes us on an awesome adventure through ancient forests, sacred groves and fungal networks. He explains how recent research has demonstrated that trees have a sense of taste, smell and touch; they have feelings, they communicate with each other, and they protect each other. They have families like we do and they love each other in remarkably compassionate and innovative ways. I recommend this book to everyone: it changed my life by opening my mind to a beautiful new world that was always there, but that I had become numb and dumb to. Nature is omnipresent and omnipotent; and I began to realise how She is constantly nurturing me and looking after me. It was like finding a wise old Ammamma that I had neglected for decades.

In closing, I wanted to share an example from Wohlleben's book that illustrates how plant behaviour can be an exemplar for human interactions. When a tree dies, the stump loses all ability to nourish itself, and slowly, it decays and gets absorbed into the forest floor. In some cases however, a stump remains alive; it stays green with lifegiving chlorophyll. But how can this be? Researchers have found that some stumps are kept alive for centuries by neighbouring trees. These special stumps are fed and cared for by local kin trees via their complex underground root structures and symbiotic fungal networks. Wohlleben explains that such a well-cared-for stump was probably the trunk of a particularly old or venerable member of the tree community. Perhaps it was the mother tree of that grove, surviving for centuries and continuing to be honoured with offerings of life by successive generations of trees. As new life grows in, on and all around her, she carries on with the support of her children and grandchildren.

In this example, it is clear that not all trees are the same, or in Orwellian terms, 'All trees are equal, but some trees are more equal than others.' And this is exactly what we find in the plant kingdom, albeit as an expression of compassion rather than hierarchy. Wohlleben asks: 'Do tree societies have second-class citizens just like human societies? It seems they do, though the idea of "class" doesn't quite fit. It is rather the degree of connection—or maybe even affection—that decides how helpful a tree's colleagues will be' (*Hidden Life*, pp 4-5). Trees love each other like humans, they have families and they nurture each other with empathy for their entire lives. They do not compete, they cooperate. Indeed the discovery of natural phenomena like this could be a remarkably fresh way to gain new perspectives, insights and solutions for some of human civilisation's most pressing challenges, from water shortage and food security to climate change and caste.

Much, much more field research is required to study the open secret of tree societies. Indeed, we are just beginning to understand the mysterious and wondrous inner life of the plant kingdom. The ancients however seemed to have accessed this knowledge through experiential rather than analytic means. One great lesson they learnt from these trees was to care for all the creatures of your community. No one is high, no one is low. Like the roots of a mighty peepal tree, all things are spread out in a complex web of interrelationships. This is the same as the interconnectedness/codependence described by the Buddhists and Jains over two millennia ago. In closing, I quote again from Wohlleben's exceptional book: 'Every tree is valuable to the community and worth keeping around for as long as possible. And that is why even sick individuals are supported and nourished until they recover. Next time, perhaps it will be other way around, and the supporting tree might be the one in need of assistance' (*Hidden Life*, p 4). What a beautiful way to live in peace and harmony. Let us hope that as a species we can be more like the trees, our ancient brothers and sisters. As the Kaṭha Upaniṣad says: 'Everything in this world, whatever it may be, comes from the life breath and is animated by it. The everlasting Tree of Life is pure and undying. All the worlds are contained in it, and there is nothing whatsoever beyond it. This is truly that' (II.3.1-2). ■

Srinivas Reddy is a scholar, musician and poet



THE LEGEND AND LEGACY OF MAHENDRA SINGH DHONI

A cricket icon calls it a day

By LHENDUP G BHUTIA

MAHENDRA SINGH DHONI AHEAD OF THE WORLD CUP MATCH AGAINST THE WEST INDIES AT OLD TRAFFORD IN MANCHESTER, ENGLAND, JUNE 2019

Photo AP

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ack in 2014, at the end of the third Test match in Melbourne, Mahendra Singh Dhoni presided over the customary post-match media conference like it were any other. He answered questions with a dour expression; he joked a bit. He told a journalist "There is a spicy answer and there is a sober answer," and went ahead with a particularly sober choice. He teased another to reword a question on "rash shots" to "loose shots". And he lamented the inability to get rid of the Australian tail-enders with the quip, "Now even PETA has said you can't cosmetically remove the tail."

It was a typical Dhoni press conference. Somewhat jovial and loquacious without really saying much.

Although the Test series had been lost, unlike the Australian tour two years earlier, India had been competitive. Dhoni himself had just batted out 39 tense deliveries to draw the third match. Just one more Test remained. Just a single day separated the new year. Dhoni appeared relaxed. He answered some more questions, joked a bit, shook a few hands and left.

Less than an hour later, all hell broke loose. A Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) press release arrived by email. Dhoni had retired from Test cricket. The biggest Indian sports star since Sachin Tendulkar had hung up his boots without once giving a hint of what he had been considering. There was going to be no fanfare, no farewell match, or even a farewell speech. It was as if—sometime between the jokes he cracked at that press conference, or on the walk back to his hotel room, or maybe in-between those 39 balls he faced, or before—it had occurred to him that his time was up.

Only 10 more matches separated him from the record of playing 100 Tests—only 10 Indians have achieved this feat. But this wasn't going to hold back the cricketer who famously didn't play for records.

Six years later, after over a year of intense speculation, he has announced his retirement from all forms of international cricket. Announcement is an incorrect word. It was as though he were sending in a resignation letter to his superior at the Railways. 'Thanks a lot for ur love and support throughout. from 1929 hrs consider me as Retired,' he wrote on Instagram.

The speculation over Dhoni's future had increased ever since that semi-final loss at the World Cup last year. Everyone who mattered was compelled to make a comment, from Virat Kohli and the coach to the selectors and the BCCI president. Only Dhoni stayed away. It was as if he didn't care to clear the air. He stayed away to the extent that it appeared he would go away without ever announcing anything.

And then, right in the middle of the pandemic, at the start of his IPL training camp, when no one was expecting it, he called it a day.

Dhoni is famously Indian cricket's biggest enigma. He probably scoffs at the word. A man with the ability to look at the most pressured situations in an uncluttered manner will see the word for what it is—an empty label created by the media because of his inaccessibility. Besides, when you observe Dhoni, you get the feeling that he does not buy into his own adulation.

And yet, for someone whose life story has been so well documented, about whom even a biopic has been made while he was still playing, Dhoni is probably the Indian captain we least know. Nobody famously knows what he is thinking. Very early in his career, he pulled up the drawbridge on the media. He didn't do interviews; he didn't deny or discuss speculations; at press conferences, he often contradicted himself and came up with such lengthy analogies that one forgot what the original question had been. Dhoni's inaccessibility isn't limited to just the media. VVS Laxman famously could not reach Dhoni to tell him of his retirement. Even his wife Sakshi had to contact Suresh Raina so the message that she had just delivered a baby could be passed on.

The story of Dhoni's arrival at cricket is fairly well known by now. How the son of a water-pump operator living in a house so small that he would struggle to find a place for his kitbag strayed from football to cricket; how he had not been informed of his

DHONI CELEBRATES AFTER INDIA WINS THE T20 CHAMPIONSHIP FINAL AGAINST PAKISTAN IN JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA, 2007

selection for the Duleep Trophy and the car his friends drove so he could catch a flight to the venue broke down midway; and how it appeared he had reached the culmination of his cricketing promise: a job of train ticket collector through the sports quota.

It was around this time that the BCCI had set up a now defunct programme (Talent Resource Development Wing or TRDW) to spot and groom talented youths outside established cricket centres under former Indian captain Dilip Vengsarkar. "It was Prakash Poddar [a former cricketer and then TRDW officer] who was in Jamshedpur watching a U-19 match when he spotted Dhoni playing in an adjoining ground," Vengsarkar reminisces. Although Dhoni was about 22 years old then and TRDW was meant to pick players under 19, an exception was made for Dhoni.

When you reflect upon Dhoni's journey, it is difficult not to sense the invisible hand of destiny guiding this wicketkeeper-batsman to his fate. A year after that chance spotting by a visiting official of a now defunct programme, the other wicketkeeper option of the India A team to visit Zimbabwe

DINESH KARTHIK WAS BUMPED UP TO THE SENIOR INDIAN TEAM, FREEING UP A SPOT FOR DHONI. ANOTHER YEAR LATER, THE COUNTRY WAS EATING OUT OF THE LONG-HAIRED NEW WICKETKEEPER'S HANDS. HE HAD REPLACED KARTHIK IN THE SENIOR TEAM; BROKEN THE RECORD OF THE HIGHEST SCORE BY A WICKETKEEPER IN ODIS, A RECORD THAT STILL STANDS; AND PERVEZ MUSHARRAF WAS ASKING HIM NOT TO CUT HIS HAIR. TWO YEARS INTO HIS INTERNATIONAL DEBUT, HE HAD CAPTAINED INDIA TO A T20 WORLD CUP WIN

and Kenya, Dinesh Karthik, was bumped up to the senior Indian team, freeing up a spot for Dhoni. Another year later, the country was eating out of the long-haired new wicket-keeper's hands. He had replaced Karthik in the senior team; broken the record of the highest score by a wicketkeeper in One-Day Internationals (ODIs), a record that still stands; and Pervez Musharraf was asking him not to cut his hair. Two years into his international debut, he had captained India to a T20 World Cup win.

"There was this buzz about him before he was selected for the Indian team," says former Indian cricketer and coach Anshuman Gaekwad. "And when I saw him, I thought, what nonsense is this. What are these shots? What way of keeping wickets is this? And all that long hair and mannerism. I thought he wouldn't last much. And a year later, he had completely transformed."

Dhoni scored over 10,000 runs at a batting average of over 50 in ODIs, nearly 5,000 runs at an average of nearly 40 in Test matches, over 1,500 runs in nearly 40 T20 internationals. Some of his IPL numbers are even more exemplary. These are remarkable figures for any batsman. But even these really tell only half the story. Dhoni took games so deep that he made what had happened before the final over immaterial. It didn't matter if individual centuries had been scored or five-wicket hauls had been taken. Dhoni would bring the result of the match down to the last over. He turned the game from Team India against another team to Dhoni against the last bowler standing. He would make it look like a penalty shootout. And more than his hitting ability in that final over, it was his ability to soak in pressure that made him prevail. The bowler just crumbled.

And yet this was not the only role he performed. In the final years when his batting began to let him down, Kohli seemed to suggest his other two skills—that of wicket-keeping and captaining or mentoring once Kohli took over—were good enough for him to retain his spot. Dhoni stumped more batsmen than anyone else in limited overs' history. He deflected throws for direct hits, he stopped runs by standing up to wickets or sticking his leg out. Many bowlers have frequently confessed that

DHONI WITH TEAMMATES DURING A PRACTICE SESSION IN DELHI, MARCH 2011

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DHONI TOOK GAMES SO DEEP THAT HE MADE WHAT HAD HAPPENED BEFORE THE FINAL OVER IMMATERIAL. IT DIDN'T MATTER IF INDIVIDUAL CENTURIES HAD BEEN SCORED OR FIVE-WICKET HAULS HAD BEEN TAKEN. DHONI WOULD BRING THE RESULT OF THE MATCH DOWN TO THE LAST OVER. HE TURNED THE GAME FROM TEAM INDIA AGAINST ANOTHER TEAM TO DHONI AGAINST THE LAST BOWLER STANDING

they owe half their wickets in the match to Dhoni. The former Australian cricketer Michael Slater once dubbed him the 'fastest gloves in the West.' Throughout history, great batsmen have often worried that captaincy affected their form. Dhoni probably scoffed at such romanticised notions of fleeting form. He once said, when asked about his batting form, "When it comes to the mind, it depends on what you're feeding into the mind. You come and say, 'This is Napier' and it believes it's Napier. If you see, it's an abstract. When people say 'He's in form', nobody has seen form." As captain, his instinctive and calculated moves won the country three ICC tournaments (two World Cups and a Champion's Trophy) and took India to No 1 in Test rankings.

Vengsarkar, who was chief selector back in 2007 when Dhoni was appointed captain of the T20 team after the senior players had decided not to play the format, says Dhoni's calm approach just two years into his international career had impressed everyone in the team. "I was in England with the team and the other four selectors were in India. And I remember how all of us were in agreement that Dhoni would be the skipper," he says.

As captain, Dhoni had the unenviable task of captaining a

DHONI WITH TEAMMATES IN MULTAN, PAKISTAN, 2006

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DHONI AND VIRAT KOHLI AFTER INDIA WINS THE WORLD CUP IN MUMBAI, APRIL 2011; (RIGHT) DHONI CELEBRATES A WICKET DURING INDIA'S ICC WORLD T20 FINAL AGAINST SRI LANKA IN DHAKA, BANGLADESH, APRIL 2014

GETTY IMAGES

team filled with former captains. But he ran the team his way, and gradually pushed some of those who had gone past their useby date out. "This is no mean task [handling seniors]," Gaekwad says. "Even when I was coach, I have seen it. It is tough to tell players who have played more than you to do something a certain way."

The rise of a sporting superstar from the cricketing backwaters of Jharkhand was a phenomenal story. Particularly from a marketing perspective. Just as Tendulkar had been heralded as the personification of a new liberalised India of the 1990s, Dhoni was seen as the symbol of the real India, a representative of the aspirations of the country's smaller towns and cities in a new millennium.

Dhoni's brand value soon caught up with his staggering exploits on field. Before his arrival, with the exception of Tendulkar, the advertising landscape was dominated with Bollywood bigwigs. Cricketers endorsed only a few products and they tended to be conscious of the image of these brands. Dhoni had no such qualms. He endorsed multiple brands; even an alcohol company. By 2010, Dhoni had signed an unheard of sum of Rs 210 crore for a three-year endorsement deal with Rhiti Sports Management, surpassing even Tendulkar's Rs 180 crore three-year deal back in 2006.

His influence was also expanding from the advertising landscape and the cricket field to now the powerful corridors of the BCCI. He became captain of the board president N Srinivasan's IPL team, Chennai Super Kings (CSK), and a vice president in his company, India Cements. Rhiti Sports Management, which handles Dhoni and is run by his friend Arun Pandey (some say Dhoni even has a stake in it), also began to represent CSK and a number of other cricketers.

There were accusations of conflict of interest. A talent agency that Dhoni is rumoured to have a stake in was now representing him, several cricketers, and also a team that he captained and that was owned by the board president. Dhoni, however, roughed out these questions. It was as though he felt it was beneath him to clear the air. In 2012, after the whitewash in England and Australia, when the selectors tried to sack Dhoni from the ODI captaincy, Srinivasan made an unprecedented use of his powers to overturn that decision. Soon, the selector Mohinder

Amarnath, widely expected to take over as chairman, was dropped from the committee.

A year later, the ties to Srinivasan became murkier when the IPL spot-fixing and betting scandal broke out and Srinivasan's son-in-law Gurunath Meiyappan was found guilty. It is said that Dhoni told the Mudgal Committee, appointed to probe the scandal, that Meiyappan was only a "cricket enthusiast" and unconnected with CSK's management.

Dhoni refrained from addressing the issue openly. After the fiasco, when he addressed a press conference on the eve of Team India's departure for the Champions Trophy, the questions that kept coming up were for his comments on the scandal. The otherwise loquacious captain now fell silent. He only smiled excruciatingly in response, waiting for the media manager to interrupt.

While Dhoni took Indian cricket to dizzying heights, there were several lows too. Less than a year after the 2011 World Cup win, India suffered its worst run in Test cricket, 0-8 losses in England and Australia. It wasn't entirely his fault. India's much vaunted batting order was coming apart; the bowlers were struggling to put together any decent sessions. But Dhoni let the games drift. In these moments, it looked like he didn't care enough.

Towards the later part of his career, Dhoni's batting skills had diminished. But he was too proud to admit it. His famed calm now ruptured every time someone brought it up. He began to snap at media conferences. Once, he even suggested no one ask that question unless they knew someone fitter than him.

Destiny appeared to have thrown him one last lifeline in the semi-finals last year. After Ravindra Jadeja's heroics, there were 31 runs to get in two overs. In his prime, Dhoni would have hit a few boundaries and ensured he played the final over. But this wasn't the same Dhoni. And he knew it too. He couldn't trust himself to hit boundaries at will.

And so he ran a second run that in his prime he would have refused. Martin Guptill scooped up the ball from square leg and aimed at the only wicket visible to him. The best finisher in the game was caught short by just a few heartbreaking inches. The pragmatic Dhoni would know. There are no fairytale finishes. ■

A Working Class Hero

HE SMILED AS HE KILLED

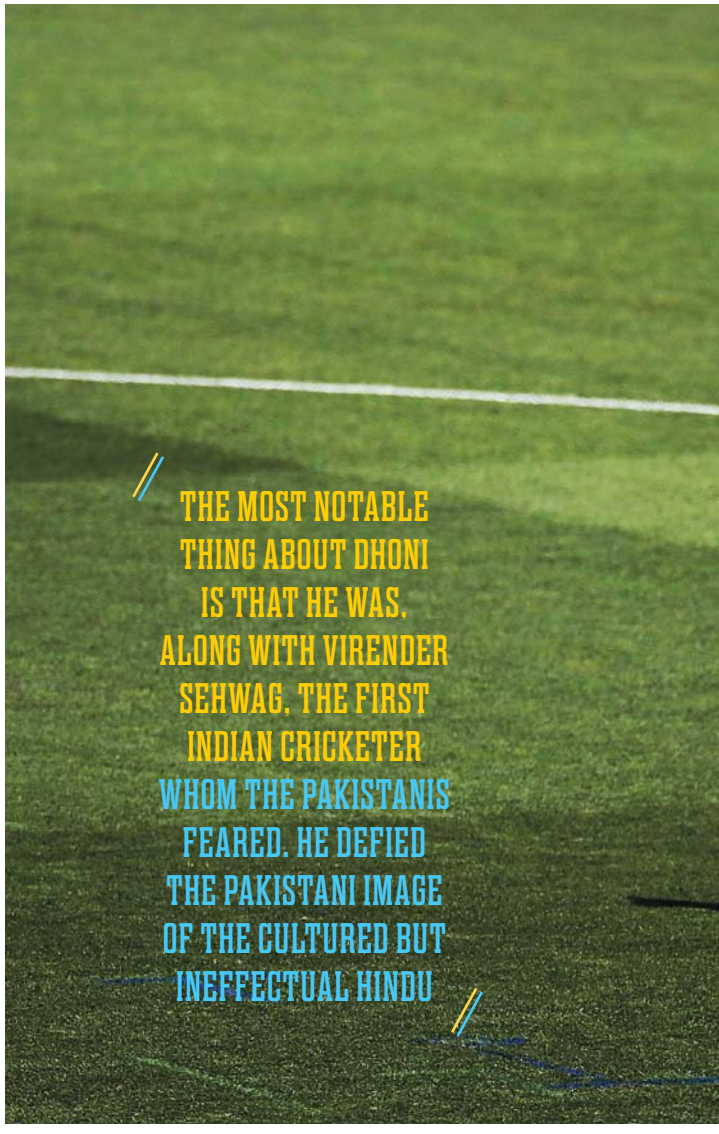
By TUNKU VARADARAJAN

There have been calls to confer the Bharat Ratna on Mahendra Singh Dhoni of Jharkhand and India. The former national cricket captain announced his retirement from international selection with a certain mofussil flourish, posting the news on Instagram with a Bollywood golden oldie as soundtrack. '*Main pal do pal ka shayar hoon, pal do pal meri kahani hai.*' Even if Dhoni deserved India's highest civilian honour—which he does not, as Sachin Tendulkar before him did not—the corny nature of his departure should rule him out. On aesthetic grounds, if nothing else.

And yet, make no mistake, Dhoni was a cricketer unlike any other India has produced. He is India's first, true working-class hero. "A working class hero is something to be," sang John Lennon. "There's room at the top/they're telling you still, but first you must learn how to smile as you kill." Dhoni smiled as he killed. He was the TTE-turned-VIP: Train Ticket Examiner turned Very Important Person.

Dhoni is the second TTE who is a part of my life. The first was a man called Harihar Prasad Gupta—"Guptaji"—whom my father befriended when he (my dad) was a young district magistrate in Hardoi, in Uttar Pradesh, in the late 1950s. Guptaji met my father as he worked his way through a train one day, checking and punching tickets, and the TTE and the IAS-*afsar* formed a firm friendship. It was an unusual connection that cut across class lines, very rare in the India of the time. And it was, as it turned out, a lifelong friendship.

When Dhoni started to become famous—and it began to emerge that he had worked for the Indian Railways before he played cricket for India—I thought again of Guptaji. The two men, Dhoni and Guptaji, could not have been more different. Guptaji was a man locked into his lot, working for a lifetime at his government job, his pension bolted in, to ensure that his family would be secure, his house paid for—Neel Cottage, it was



THE MOST NOTABLE THING ABOUT DHONI IS THAT HE WAS, ALONG WITH VIRENDER SEHWAG, THE FIRST INDIAN CRICKETER WHOM THE PAKISTANIS FEARED. HE DEFIED THE PAKISTANI IMAGE OF THE CULTURED BUT INEFFECTUAL HINDU

called, in Godowliya in Varanasi—and his daughters married into good homes. There were several daughters, more than was prudent for a man of modest means, but Guptaji sent them all to school, then college, and they all married well, and with dignity. Guptaji was a proud man. His was a job well done.

So was Dhoni's. His India was more promising than Guptaji's. There was money abundant for sport, and the avenues to excellence weren't reserved—as they had been in Guptaji's time—for the well-born and the privileged. The closest person to Dhoni that I can think of in modern Indian cricket is Eknath Dhondu Solkar—the unfashionable name 'Dhondu' veiled, mostly, in his playing career, by the initial D. Eknath D Solkar he was, for the most part—'Ekki' to his fans.

Solkar, the son of a groundsman at the Hindu Gymkhana in Bombay—a job that was, in those days, regarded as little better than a *maali*'s—played 27 Test matches for India between his debut in 1969 and his retirement in 1977. The small number of Tests played is startling. Looking back, he was a mainstay of Indian cricket in the years when I was a young boy. And yet, he played fewer than a third of the 90 Tests that Dhoni played for his country. An upstart like Rishabh Pant has already played 13. I suspect that Solkar retired with little money saved, and in a modest house. He died at 57 of a heart attack. He was the old India, talented, thwarted, mortal. Unlike Dhoni, who is a dollar multimillionaire, feted worldwide, and immortal—in the way successful sportsmen are these days.

MAHENDRA SINGH DHONI AT EDEN PARK IN AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND, MARCH 14, 2015

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Dhoni was a brilliant captain, a husbander par excellence of scarce resources—in this not unlike Nehru, who did a lot on the world stage with the very little that India had at its disposal. And yet Dhoni was also an assertive man, unlike Nehru, physically immense and active. Few cricketers before him have brought to the Indian game the athleticism and corporeality that Dhoni did. Witness his muscularity, his scampering swiftness between the wickets, his massive-arsed sixes—listen to Waqar Younis, as commentator, describe the strength of his shots—and his tirelessness. Dhoni was a physical phenomenon in a team that was historically elegant but unathletic, even borderline effete, peopled with (mostly) Brahmin boys who seldom played to win and whose bags were carried by other people. College graduates with servants at home and no life-or-death stake in the game of cricket. Soft *babalog*. Cannon-fodder for Clive Lloyd, or Imran, or Botham, or Steve Waugh.

The most notable thing about Dhoni is that he was—along with the irrepressible Virender Sehwag—the first Indian cricketer whom the Pakistanis feared. He defied the Pakistani image of the cultured but ineffectual Hindu. They saw in Sunil Gavaskar a perfectionism that was admirable but abstract, and in Kapil Dev a robustness that had been absent in Indian cricket for decades. By contrast, they saw in Sehwag a butcher among vegetarians.

But in Dhoni they saw a raw strength and stamina that to their minds was most un-Hindu. Who can forget the almost homoerotic praise showered by Pervez Musharraf on Dhoni during India's tour of Pakistan in 2004, when the Pakistani dictator urged him not to have a haircut? (In those days, Dhoni wore his locks long.) Dhoni smiled broadly in response to a man who had waged war on India only five years earlier; but born on that night, perhaps, was his adamant commitment to the Indian armed forces. (He came to be an honorary colonel in the Territorial Army.)

This commitment could, sometimes, come across as unseemly. His insistence on wearing gloves with military insignia on them during the 2019 World Cup was a display of gaudy patriotism, unnecessary in the context. It was certainly at odds with the understated quality of his captaincy and approach to the game—which emphasised the calm and the cerebral above all else. ■

Tunku Varadarajan is executive editor at Stanford University's Hoover Institution

Captain India

IT IS THE SECOND MOST IMPORTANT JOB IN THE COUNTRY AND ONLY THE FEW ABLE TO WITHSTAND ITS PRESSURES LEAVE A LEGACY

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

The cricket captain is said to be next to god in the Indian imagination and, as a job, the second most important. If you looked at the popularity of Mahendra Singh Dhoni at its height, that can appear true. Remember that for much of his reign, there was also another god competing for attention, one who had established himself as the reigning deity much earlier and who Dhoni himself grew up revering—Sachin Tendulkar. Tendulkar is the only non-captain (that is, in his primary identity) who achieved it for a length of time. You had cricketers who became gods briefly, when they were in extraordinary form, but sooner or later, the law of averages would catch up and the public would move to the next worship. Tendulkar and the Indian captain were more permanent fixtures.

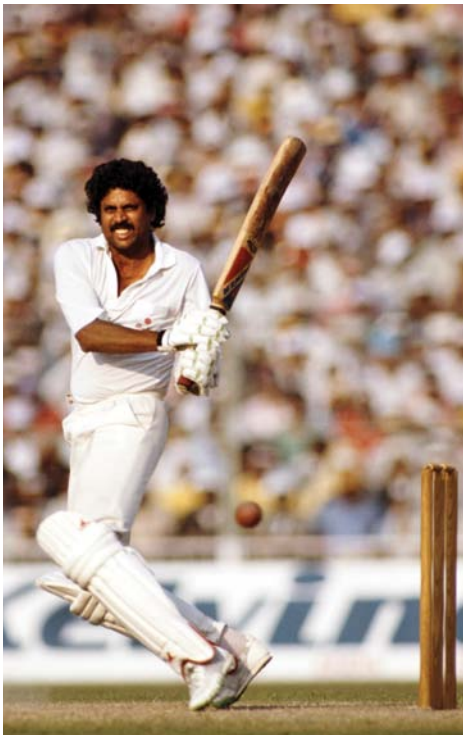
One must come back to Tendulkar because his is a telling example of what Indian team captaincy is and is not. He was a man born to cricket like fish to water and not just an ordinary fish but the fastest one in the sea. There is nothing his mind didn't know or read about the game that he was in. He was respected by opponents and teammates were in awe. No word of his would be ignored or, if it was a command, disobeyed. The men of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), who imagined themselves puppeteers of the team, stood at arms' length from any twisting of Tendulkar's hands. His popularity was dynamite for them to intrude on. Tendulkar, should he have chosen, could have become the dictator of Indian cricket. And yet, what did captaincy do to him? It made him recoil.

It was just not a burden that he enjoyed. He chose batting over it. You could be the best cricketer in the world and even a tough leader but it didn't necessarily make you ready for captaincy. That needed an elusive quality, the ability to withstand the responsibility of being worshipped by a nation whose loyalty was as fickle as a Test series defeat. If you want an example of how captaincy makes sensible cricketers do strange things, take Rahul Dravid in his second Test as a stand-in captain when Sourav Ganguly had been unable to play because of injury. It was in 2004, against Pakistan in Multan. Tendulkar was on 194, six short of a double hundred, and with more than 15 overs left for the day. India was at 675 runs, on the back of his partnership with Virender Sehwag, who scored a triple hundred. And it was only the second day. Every captain on earth would have allowed Tendulkar to complete the 200. And yet Dravid, the most decent of sportsmen without jealousy or politics in him, took the decision to declare, just to show that he could make tough decisions. India won on the fourth day and it should have vindicated him. But that it won on the fourth day also showed it was a decision that just looked more vicious than

MAHENDRA SINGH DHONI WITH THE ICC CRICKET WORLD CUP TROPHY IN MUMBAI, APRIL 3, 2011

Photos **GETTY IMAGES**

SUNIL GAVASKAR



KAPIL DEV

SOURAV GANGULY

tough. It defines Dravid's captaincy because what else can one remember of it?

Ganguly would say it was a wrong decision. John Wright, the coach, would say it was the wrong decision. Both would tell Tendulkar they were not party to it. And Tendulkar would go on to write about it in his autobiography *Playing It My Way*: 'The following morning, Rahul finally came to me and said he had heard that I was upset and wanted to have a chat. I informed him that I was indeed upset and there was no way I would pretend otherwise. I asked him what the thinking was behind declaring at the time that he did. It wasn't as if we were pressing for a win, and one over wouldn't have made much difference. We had agreed to a plan at tea and I was doing exactly as I had been told. Rahul said that the call was taken with the interests of the team in mind. It was important to demonstrate to the Pakistanis that we meant business and were keen to win. I wasn't convinced. First, I said to him that I was batting for the team as well. Yes, I had scored 194, but the 194 was meant to help the team and it was my individual contribution to the team's cause. So to say that the decision was taken in the best interests of the team wasn't altogether correct.'

Just as Tendulkar, captaincy didn't sit well with Dravid either. He remains a filler in the history of Indian cricket captaincy. Essentially, since the captain became demigod, there have been seven—Sunil Gavaskar, Kapil Dev, Mohammad Azharuddin, Sourav Ganguly, Mahendra Singh Dhoni and Virat Kohli—who had staying power. The pressures on them coincided with cricket becoming religion from the 1980s onwards, on the back of the 1983 One Day International (ODI) World Cup victory. Many believe that Sourav Ganguly was the first real captain to show aggression and stand up against the white domination of cricket. But that is only because he came after the introverted Azharuddin and also in the wake of the mess left behind by match-fixing allegations. No one who remembers Gavaskar or Kapil Dev on the field would think they were any less fiercely competitive than Ganguly. They just didn't have a team to back up the aggression with results, especially on foreign tours with pitches favourable to fast bowlers. As India became the commercial centre of cricket, it was inevitable that with the game moving into the interiors, the pool of talent would increase. And vast amounts of money would help their training. Fast pitches and fast bowlers entered the mix. Once that handicap was removed, India's record could become more equal against countries like Australia. Ganguly was in the sweet spot. After the BCCI sought to clean up the team, it left him able to build a new one. His aggression is overestimated in the resurgence. A Gavaskar or Kapil Dev who got the same conditions as Ganguly did would probably have done the same. They were all fiercely competitive thinking cricketers.

Dhoni was a continuum. His absence of exhibition didn't make him any less dominant. With every passing year, the

TENDULKAR IS A TELLING EXAMPLE OF WHAT INDIAN TEAM CAPTAINCY IS AND IS NOT. HE WAS A MAN BORN TO CRICKET. AND YET, WHAT DID CAPTAINCY DO TO HIM? IT MADE HIM RECOIL. THE CAPTAIN HAS TO KEEP PACE WITH A NATION'S EXPECTATIONS. THOSE UNABLE TO DO SO EXIT SOON. IT IS NOT CHANCE THAT DHONI, ONCE HE BECAME CAPTAIN, WAS NEVER IN DANGER OF LOSING THAT POSITION FOR A LONG TIME

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SACHIN TENDULKAR

RAHUL DRAVID

money that Indian cricket was making was increasing exponentially. The game entered Tribal areas. Academies were spotting and nurturing talent at younger and younger ages. The story of Indian cricket over the last two decades is of every captain being increasingly spoilt for choices in every single department of the game. It was somewhat inevitable Ganguly's record would be better than Azharuddin's, Dhoni's better than Ganguly's, Kohli's better than Dhoni's. If they had not done well, they would have been removed much earlier. The captain has to keep pace with the expectations of a cricket-obsessed people. Those unable to do so exit soon. It settles on someone who can shoulder the staggering burden. It is not chance that Dhoni, once he became captain, was never in danger of losing that position for a long time.

The story, however, has to end because age is a furiously ticking time bomb for sportsmen. Cricket is kinder than other sports, but even here by the time a player is in his early 30s, it is just an extended finale. Indian captains often leave not in the most graceful of manners, their towering domination mostly undone. Ganguly endured humiliation before he decided to walk away. He would write about it in his book *A Century Is Not Enough*: 'I was so confident of my place in the tri-nation one-day series that was to follow that I had brought along the extra light blue one-day pads in my kitbag. There was absolutely no doubt in my mind that I would get picked. The night before the selection, a Kolkata journalist called on my Australia number. He told me that my one-day place was not a certainty. I found this outrageous. I said, I have not only scored in all four Test innings of the series but have also been the most consistent performer for the Indian team this season. Look, last year I was the third highest one-day run-getter in the world after Kallis and Sangakkara. You are saying they will drop me? Impossible! But he was right. Next afternoon, when the team was announced, Rahul and I were dropped. I never played for the Indian one-day team again.'

Dhoni himself is said to have had a part in Ganguly's retirement because he wanted the freedom to shape a team of the future. Years later, in 2019, when Ganguly, as BCCI president, was asked whether it was time for Dhoni to retire his answer, as reported in *Espncricinfo*, was: "What he wants to do, what he doesn't [want] to do...What matters is what Dhoni wants." By then, many Dhoni worshippers were questioning his hanging on, or the necessity to play one more ODI World Cup where he portended to be a liability. As it turned out, he wasn't. But neither was he able to be the finisher who would lead the way to victory. No other captain perhaps got the leeway he did in deciding the terms of his leaving. All the numerous hats he donned together—batsman, wicketkeeper, mentor, shadow coach—kept him relevant. ■

Dhoni Chic

THE CRICKET STORY BEGAN IN RANCHI BUT THE CULTURAL PHENOMENON BECAME PAN-INDIAN

BY KAVEREE BAMZAI

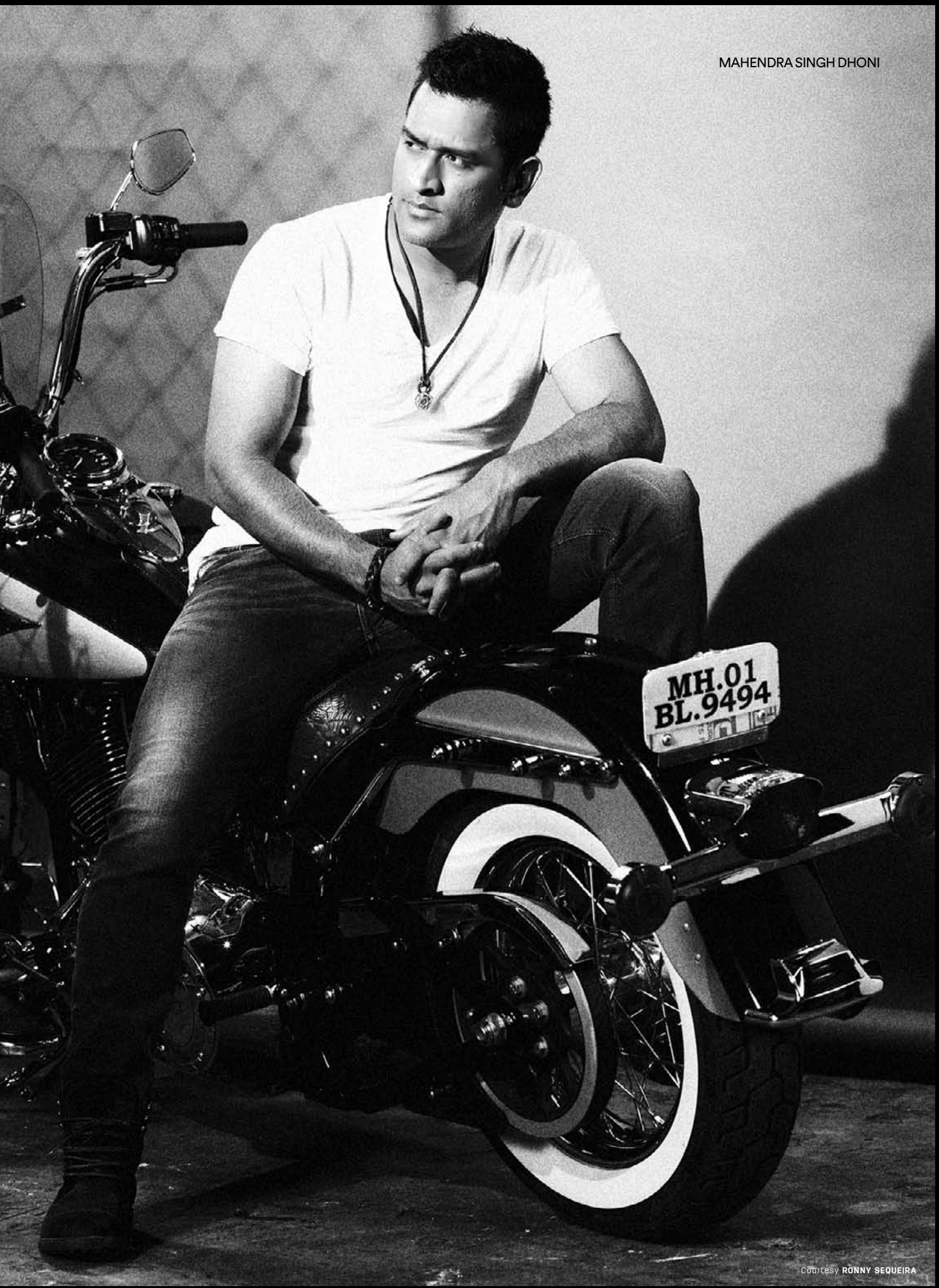
It's a scene a sports journalist from Chennai narrates. The Chennai Super Kings (CSK) manager calls Mahendra Singh Dhoni down from his room at Park Sheraton to meet a group of children sponsored by a brand he endorses. Clad in shorts and t-shirt, the CSK captain comes down, checks whether there is any media present (there isn't), quickly wears his manager's team jersey and stoops down, spending quality time talking to his little fans.

That's Dhoni at ease, in the city he has represented consistently for 10 of the 12 years it played in the Indian Premier League, with a constituency that appreciates him purely for his talent. There are no quotas, no clubs, no hierarchies, none of the pressures and perils that divide the players from the game.

For a country used to treating its cricketers like gods, Dhoni was a quiet oddity, always correct in public, invariably heroic on the cricket pitch but eternally distant. Unlike Sachin Tendulkar, an instant success, whom India adored from the moment he stepped onto the cricket field as a 16-year-old, curly mopped child genius, Dhoni came to Team India a young man who had, at 23, made friends with failure. He carried with him the salt of the earth of Ranchi, the smell of the ground at DAV Jawahar Vidya Mandir where he would practise, and the dust of the platforms of Kharagpur station where he was a ticket collector in the Indian Railways.

And he had a personal imprimatur all his own, making him more than a mere cricketer, a cultural phenomenon. Says associate professor at the Indian Institute of Technology, Bhilai, Sonal Jha: "The rise of MS Dhoni as a cultural icon parallels the emergence of a certain vernacular masculinity in popular culture in the late-2000s. The Indian cricketing landscape was hitherto represented by urban, middle-class cricketers, exemplified by Sachin Tendulkar and Rahul Dravid. While Sourav Ganguly famously brought a new-found aggression to the Indian cricketing unit, it was with Dhoni that this aggression found a tempered and stable expression, also aligned with cricketing success." A large swathe of the Indian population identified with him, she says. Not only was he a positive expression of a relatively marginalised, regional identity, he also made it look cool, and most significantly, masculine. There were several elements to this masculinity. The carefully styled but ever-changing hair, the sculpted body, the love for motorcycles. He carried himself distinctly, says University of Hyderabad's Pramod K Nayar, like a David Beckham-type figure, in a conventional sport governed by serious norms, with his flamboyant hair and general demeanour. "There was an aura of freedom in self-expression in a sport notorious for its traditional white-flannelled appearance. To many, this was unusual, and appealing. The self-fashioning of Dhoni, changing over the years, became a national model for self-fashioning by the youth," says Nayar.

Especially, small-town youth. He stood out even among them, having come two years after the young team under Ganguly that won the Natwest Trophy in England in 2002, leading to several hailing the awesome twosome—Chandigarh's Yuvraj Singh



MAHENDRA SINGH DHONI

Courtesy **RONNY SEQUEIRA**

and Allahabad's Mohammad Kaif. Unlike another World Cup-winning captain and small-town hero before him, Kapil Dev, Dhoni was not merely a winner on the field but off the field as well. He reinvented himself, ironed out his perceived flaws, whether it was his personal grooming or his spoken English. He could fit in anywhere, but he chose to do so on his own terms.

Manas Ghosh has written in *Locating Cultural Change: Theory, Method, Process* how Dhoni transcended the idea of the 'local lad' epitomised by Sunil Gavaskar, referred to as Mumbai master, or Kapil Devi, called Haryana Hurricane. He was able to become an individual hero, who could interchangeably represent Team India, or Team CSK. Kapil Dev, the rustic Haryanvi boy of 'Palmolive *da jawab nahin*', married into Delhi money and instantly became part of the big city elite, even picking up the ultimate posh game, golf. Despite his transnational appeal, Dhoni remains a Ranchi boy, going back home between games, remaining friends with his gang of boys, and even in his IPL home, Chennai, choosing to stay at the team hotel, Park Sheraton, rather than buying a home.

The biopic, *MS Dhoni: The Untold Story*, released in 2016, only added to Dhoni's pop culture persona. By then India had won the World Cup under his captaincy, 28 years after Kapil Dev did so for the first time at Lord's. The idea of his close friend and business partner Arun Pandey (portrayed as the loyal Chittu in the movie), it was directed by Neeraj Pandey, and did much to burnish his myth. His gritty struggle, as the son of a pump operator in a state where politics in the only game being played, was transformed into an absorbing biopic, starring yet another small-town lad, Sushant Singh Rajput, whose own arc from Patna to Mumbai's big screen was a parallel to Dhoni's cricketing success. With Rajput's tragic death, the biopic has acquired a double iconicity.

In his death, Rajput has achieved the status Dhoni did with his cricket—as a self-made man from scratch, from a difficult background, who becomes man of the masses. In Rajput's death, there is also an echo of Dhoni's own realism. In announcing his retirement through an Instagram video on August 16th, the song in the background is Sahir Ludhianvi's classic from the 1976 *Kabhie Kabhie*, '*Main pal do pal ka shayar hoon*'. Dhoni doesn't shy away from the sad and even ugly moments in his career in the choice of images in the video, whether it was his duck upon ODI debut against Bangladesh or his effigies being burnt when Team India lost the 2007 World Cup. The caption is short, to the point: 'Thanks a lot for ur love and support throughout. From 1929 hrs consider me as retired.' It's interesting he should announce such a major life decision on Instagram where his daughter Ziva Singh Dhoni is quite the little star with 1.7 million followers.

Dhoni came to Team India at the height of the consumption of cricket as

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PRACTISING IN AHMEDABAD, 2005; (BELOW) ATTENDING A CRICKET MATCH IN SRINAGAR AS A LT COLONEL, NOVEMBER 2017

GETTY IMAGES

entertainment. Four years later, the entertainment quotient was upped with the introduction of the Indian Premier League and the potent mixture of big business, cinema and sport that it became. Amidst its cheerleaders, its after-parties and its glamorous owners, Dhoni, by now a very rich man, seemed above seduction. Even his choice of wife was surprising. Brushing aside rumours, he married a young working girl, Sakshi Rawat, whom he met while she was interning at ITC Kolkata.

Historian Kaushik Bhaumik explains Dhoni's appeal as the first new managerial captain, entrepreneurial in his approach towards Team India as a startup in New India. Says he: "Sourav Ganguly was more of a banker type. Dhoni is the new version of Kapil Dev for his times. Self-made man of the people, above all, young, open and entrepreneurial. Caste-wise, Kapil Dev represented an OBC uplift." Dhoni is more interesting—as a Rajput, he is originally from Uttarakhand, but his *karmabhoomi* is Ranchi, Jharkhand, giving him a pan-Indian appeal, underlined by his captaincy of CSK, which made him *Thala* (Leader) Dhoni. His father's employment in MECON India, a public sector undertaking, is yet another strand that broadens Dhoni's appeal, enabling the majority of Indians to identify with him.

Add to that his love for the Territorial Army where he serves as a Lieutenant Colonel, and farming (on his 50-acre land near Ranchi), and you have a complete patriot who wears his country's colours on his sleeve. Yet, even in these hyper-nationalist times, his is not an aggressive obsession with the nation but an inclusive one, represented in his choice of teammates from across the country's towns. Indeed, much before Prime Minister Narendra Modi articulated the idea of New India, Dhoni was embodying it: its geographical mobility, its enrepreneurial ability, its non-academic possibilities, and its non-religious new gods. There's a scene in the movie, *MS Dhoni*, where a young Dhoni goes to a Durga Puja mela and asks for a poster of Sachin and his mother says: 'Who is this god in blue and what is this *mukut* he is wearing?' The poster is of Sachin, wearing a helmet.

In the case of all sportstars (and different from filmstars), says Nayar, we *see them earning their laurels* through their labours on the field, their injuries, frustrations, failures. They are literally an embodiment of skill, training, pain, suffering. There is no sugar-coating, no make-up: it is out there, sinews, blood, sweat, tears. Dhoni's spectacular run chases, agility, running between wickets, among other things he did on the field, were not the effects of cameras and lights: he did it in the flesh, Nayar points out. Dhoni, coming from where he is, did not present us a miracle: the overnight stardom or superstar. Instead, he gave us a marvel. "Miracles are associated with the divine and the supernatural, marvels with human wonders, and that is what Dhoni became for many," he adds.

He was also able to cut through the mediation of journalists and speak to the audience directly in post-match prize ceremonies or press briefings. Rarely, if ever, did he give interviews, and

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DHONI'S GRITTY STRUGGLE WAS TRANSFORMED INTO AN ABSORBING BIOPIC, STARRING YET ANOTHER SMALL-TOWN LAD, SUSHANT SINGH RAJPUT

preferred to manage his own media image. He used his body to communicate to the world. His hair alone is a marker of his stylistic progress, going from the 'orange long hair' that his hairstylist Sapna Bhavnani inherited (and then Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf commented on) to the mohawk she gave him during a Champions League match in Ranchi in 2013 or the V-hawk he had in 2018.

And like all entertainers, almost everything he did was meme worthy, especially his cheeky comments behind the wickets as he instructed his bowlers to hit the mark and shouted at his fielders to look sharp. Like everything about him, his keeping and batting were unconventional, especially the trademark helicopter shot. His endorsements, from motorcyle oil to Myntra. In 2019, Dhoni jumped up three ranks on Duff & Phelps' Celebrity Brand Valuation report with a brand value of $41.2 million (Rs 308 crore) as compared to $26.9 million (Rs 201 crore) in 2018. According to *Moneycontrol.com*, he even topped Virat Kohli by one, with 44 brand campaigns in 2019. Dhoni is a smart investor as well. He has his own athleisure brand called SEVEN, and a gym venture, SportsFit World. He is also the co-owner of Chennaiyin FC. The cricketer last year invested in Cars24 besides co-owning sports management firm Rhiti Sports.

Enough for a young boy, in some other Durga Puja mela, in some other small town of India, to ask for a poster of yet another new god in blue, Dhoni. ■

The Passion of the Boy

MAHENDRA SINGH DHONI
AS A SCHOOLBOY IN RANCHI

from Ranchi

MAHENDRA SINGH DHONI EXEMPLIFIED THE SMALL-TOWN SPIRIT AND THE KILLER INSTINCT OF JHARKHAND

BY ULLEKH NP

Two soccer fans like me obsessed with some of the early proponents of total football and the concept of libero, Mahendra Singh Dhoni is Franz Beckenbauer of Germany and Johan Cruyff of the Netherlands rolled into one. The former, nicknamed Der Kaiser, typically snatched the game away from the jaws of defeat from an unlikely position, that of a defender, quite like a silent assassin. Cruyff had the guts and ingenuity. Between them, the two could take on the rest of the world. The Ranchi boy, of course, is closer to Beckenbauer because the footballing legend had perfected the art of winning without making a big deal about it. Dhoni, too, has always been the most collected dude on the field, whose 'Captain Cool' composure disarmed spectators and rivals alike, not to talk of the therapeutic effect he had on his boys caught in a whirlpool of emotions.

So much has been written about Dhoni's intrepid and inspiring captaincy for the Indian national team in both limited overs and Test cricket, including the stylish wicket-keeper batsman's exploits against Pakistan, Sri Lanka and various others, but less about the moral courage of the Jharkhand boy, who even at the height of his career, managed to retain his connect with his roots. He did it unassumingly amidst adoring masses and in the face of adversity. Right from those days when he sported long hair to the day that he announced his retirement, his behaviour on the field and off it cannot be seen as detached from where he came from.

One tends to take at face value when people who knew him for long say that his triumphant demeanour and unshakeable willpower are deeply rooted in his childhood in Ranchi where lower middle-class families still want their wards to land 'safe and secure' jobs and not unconventional ones. Dhoni's is certainly the will of the local boy who is a breakaway from that mould. Yet, he remains an out-and-out Ranchi kid, unflappable in the face of tense moments, on occasions when the metro-bred and the privileged lose their nerve. That I-have-nothing-to-lose air of self-assurance perhaps becomes contagious and helps win matches, as Dhoni, the son of a PSU employee, often did. The records of this middle-order batsman and wicketkeeper as Indian captain, as they say, are nothing short of stellar, having scored a massive number of runs in ODIs and led the country to remarkable wins. His poise on the field was deceptive to those who underestimated him early on, much to their disadvantage. Regardless, his rivals got the message soon enough: that he is not any faint-hearted Indian player.

Purists among anthropologists may disagree, but for a man who rose from an Indian small town that is despised even by other small towners as somewhere out there in Jharkhand, his strong moral fibre that stayed with him like a moveable feast all through his career came from the region where he was raised. Sceptics might want to check out the works of the likes of Martin Amis and the great Indian-origin VS Naipaul who have often linked personalities to where they came from to assess their rise or fall. While Naipaul did it about Argentina in the context of the Falkland War, Amis did it to dissect the persona of Diego Maradona, arguably the world's greatest soccer player. Similar attributes have been made in the biographies written on the likes of Pelé, who was raised by a strict mother in an impoverished neighbourhood of Sao Paulo, explaining why he did not go astray at the height of power and glory unlike a reckless and more talented fellow player, Garrincha, emphasising that the places you are raised in and the way you are raised tend to have a lasting impact on the lives of both ordinary men as well as legends.

True, in some cases, such ascendancy is dizzying enough to delink the subjects under review from reality—they end up thinking they are gods. That is the perspective that Martin Amis narrated with amazing skill in his 15-year-old review of a biography of Maradona. In a controversial paragraph of that article that appeared in *The Guardian* in 2005, Amis said something closer to what Naipaul had written about the Argentinian fetish for things, including cheating and sodomy (even with their wives). Sample this from Amis: 'In South America it is sometimes said, or alleged, that the key to the character of the Argentinians can be found in their assessment of Maradona's two goals in the 1986 World Cup. For the first goal, christened 'the Hand of God' by its scorer, Maradona dramatically levitated for a ballooned cross and punched the ball home with a cleverly concealed left fist. But the second goal, which came minutes later, was the one that

[England manager] Bobby Robson called the 'bloody miracle': collecting a pass from his own penalty area, Maradona, as if in expiation, put his head down and seemed to burrow his way through the entire England team before flooring Shilton with a dummy and stroking the ball into the net. Well, in Argentina, the first goal, and not the second, is the one they really like.'

By saying so, Amis avers that the eccentricities of Maradona are rooted in the Argentinian psyche. Such an observation may not find approval among sociologists or academics deep into behavioural sciences, unless, of course, the aim is propaganda to besmirch the image of the political rival. It is here that traumatic childhoods are projected as the reason why someone became 'bad', the attempt being to buttress the argument that someone is a villain beyond redemption. If the aim is to make someone look good, he becomes good *despite* his childhood trauma!

Now, Dhoni is similar to the well-raised Pelé in this regard. He is certainly a product of deeply held middle-class values and aspirations that most Indians take pride in. Which explains why Dhoni appeared for a test and became a ticket examiner on trains before he shot into the limelight by a quirk of fate. The rest, as they say, is history. He managed his rise without being swept off reality, because of the family values that he had imbibed early on, argues Shireen Qadri, a resident of the National Capital Region of Delhi who is originally from Wasseypur, close to three hours' drive from Ranchi, in Jharkhand. "I think he is shaped by small-town values and, therefore, he endears himself to a large population of India. He is certainly different because he took the road less travelled. But certain aspects of your upbringing stay with you all your life. Dhoni is a widely admired figure and a pride of Jharkhand," notes Qadri, founder and publisher, *The Punch Magazine*.

Qadri's brother Zeeshan wrote the script for the cult movie *Gangs of Wasseypur*. Although the film is about the life of people living dangerously, their future and past linked to the coal mafia in Dhanbad, links between politics and crime spanning decades, certain aspects about the hardiness of its key protagonists that coexist among small towners are on display. The director of the movie, Anurag Kashyap, had said in an interview that he was inspired by another movie, set in a small town in Tamil Nadu, *Subramaniapuram*, which also covers decades of vendetta and violence that ordinary people from lower middle-class backgrounds are drawn into by default after their loved ones meet with gruesome deaths at the hands of village toughies. Both these films may look distant from the lives of ordinary people and are confined to violent gangsters, but on closer inspection, one discovers that these are essentially stories of lay people with extreme devotion to their friends.

One of the songs in Wasseypur is titled '*Teri keh ke lunga*'. Although there are various interpretations of the lines, Qadri says that "'I will destroy you after telling you' is the closest to the original expression." One of the lines makes it clearer: '*Jisme bachna ho bach le, bach meri jaan/ Teri keh ke lunga*' (Hide wherever you want to hide, my boy/I'll tell you and finish you off).

DHONI REMAINS AN OUT-AND-OUT RANCHI KID, UNFLAPPABLE IN THE FACE OF TENSE MOMENTS, ON OCCASIONS WHEN THE METRO-BRED AND THE PRIVILEGED LOSE THEIR NERVE

The Manoj Bajpayee-starrer was an instant hit because it probably struck a chord with the rising aspirations of the small-town youth ready to avenge injustice and find its place in society.

Discounting the cinematic violence, Dhoni as wicketkeeper epitomised a peculiar killer instinct and defiance with his actions, shouts and at times deadpan graveness to the fall of the wickets, as though he were saying, 'I will tell you before your wickets fall.'

Dhoni, the indomitable hero of the masses, has himself been the subject of a biopic starring the late Sushant Singh Rajput and has inspired various biographies, bestowing his home state with perhaps more than it could have offered him. Jharkhand for long was about hockey (remember Michael Kindo?) and Birsa Munda, the folk hero and tribal freedom fighter who had died aged 24 in 1900, as the late actor Tom Alter once exclaimed during his televised travels. Now, there is one more attribute to Jharkhand besides hockey and Munda: the phenomenon called Dhoni whose meteoric rise from obscurity to stardom has few parallels in Indian cricket for a person coming, as he does, from a region that is far from the recruitment map for Indian cricket. Perhaps it is not an exaggeration to state that there are two eras in our cricketing culture: one before Dhoni, and the other, after his emergence as a leader among leaders. ■

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THE MAN AND

The new J&K Lt Governor Manoj Sinha's first task is to reach out and regain public confidence

By AMITA SHAH

WHEN FORMER Union Minister Manoj Sinha left for Delhi from his home in Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh (UP) in the first week of August, even his closest aides were clueless about the new assignment he was being entrusted with. As always, he travelled with just a suitcase by the train he usually took, the Shiv Ganga Express. A couple of days later, he was in Srinagar taking oath as Lieutenant Governor (L-G) of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K), wearing his trademark *kurta* and *dhoti*.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader slipped into the role of J&K L-G as quietly as he made a last-minute exit from the race for chief ministership of UP in 2017. Those who have known him closely say that as was characteristic of him, he maintained a placid demeanour giving out nothing, even when Yogi Adityanath, a Member of Parliament (MP) from Eastern UP like him, was chosen to be Chief Minister, a post he was seen to be tipped for till the last moment.

About three years later, the political heavyweight from UP landed in Srinagar as Prime Minister Narendra Modi's emissary in J&K, replacing Girish Chandra Murmu, an Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer, who is now Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG). It had been exactly a year since Article 370, which granted special status to the undivided state, was scrapped and J&K was bifurcated into the Union Territories of J&K and Ladakh, effective from October 31st, 2019.

Amid scepticism and hope about 'Modi's man' in Srinagar, Sinha has wasted no time before getting down to working on his complicated and challenging mandate: fulfilling the Government's promises on development and gaining the trust of the people in the sensitive Union Territory.

Stoic, low-profile, untainted and with the backing of the leadership in Delhi, he has started making out-of-the-box moves. Sinha spelt out his mission after hoisting the Tricolour at the Sher-e-Kashmir stadium in Srinagar on Independence Day. Wearing a green *kurta*, a *gamchha* (stole) and a pyjama, he spoke of changing the narrative of Kashmir from sectarianism to development, peace, progress and social harmony. He recalled the region's tradition, from Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* and Shankaracharya's Advaita to Sufi Islam and Buddhist philosophy, as a symbol of the syncretism of its inhabitants. He said it was known for bravehearts like Brigadier Rajinder Singh and Brigadier Mohammad Usman and is the land of Rishi Kashyap, Prophet Mohammad, Guru Nanak and Buddha: "We have to carry forward this legacy of religious inclusivity."

Just hours earlier, addressing the nation from the ramparts of the Red Fort in Delhi, the Prime Minister had said that once delimitation was over, an election would be held in J&K to elect a chief minister. But

MANOJ SINHA, LT GOVERNOR OF JAMMU AND KASHMIR, AT THE INDEPENDENCE DAY CEREMONY IN SRINAGAR, AUGUST 15

THE MISSION

AP

> In Manoj Sinha, we have a very senior, erudite and as a politician and in administration as a minister. ranks and understands the priorities of Prime Minister
>
> **Ram Madhav** BJP General Secretary in-charge of J&K

till that happens, which sources say could take at least a year, Sinha will be in charge. According to a person familiar with the developments, there is a proposal to appoint advisors from across political parties, including the National Conference (NC) and the J&K Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), provided they agreed to the proposal. Both these parties had boycotted his swearing-in ceremony, ignoring invitations sent to them. Under Murmu, the L-G had four civil servants as advisors: Kewal Kumar Sharma, Farooq Khan, Rajeev Bhatnagar and Baseer Ahmed Khan. Under Sinha, this number is proposed to be increased.

The precarious political situation in the Union Territory requires more than a bureaucrat at the helm, and Sinha's appointment is seen as a signal to revive political activities. "In Sinha, we have a very senior, erudite and experienced leader. He has experience in public life as a politician and in administration as a minister. That will be of great help. He comes from the party ranks and understands the priorities of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah," says Ram Madhav, BJP General Secretary in-charge of J&K.

By appointing Sinha, who has a political background, the BJP leadership is hoping to take a multi-pronged approach: establishing a link between the government and people; handling the bureaucracy, on which the Union Territory is highly dependent; and pushing the development process. "The idea is that the state should be like any other state in the country," says Madhav.

While Sinha is seen as a better choice for the job than his two predecessors, Satya Pal Malik and Murmu, several analysts view his appointment with ambivalence, wondering if political bridges can be built ignoring resentment over the scrapping of Article 370. The BJP is of the view that the disgruntlement over it will wane once development starts trickling down. In his Independence Day speech, Sinha pointed out that the constitutional change in 2019 has led to 50 decisions to usher in normalcy and development in J&K.

ONE OF THE first steps taken by Sinha, who has laid stress on education, health and infrastructure, was to hold a meeting with vice chancellors of universities at the Raj Bhavan. He asked them to prepare a roadmap to improve the functioning of universities, make suggestions on how J&K could benefit from the National Education Policy 2020, ensure gender equality and submit a report on initiatives taken by the universities in the last few years.

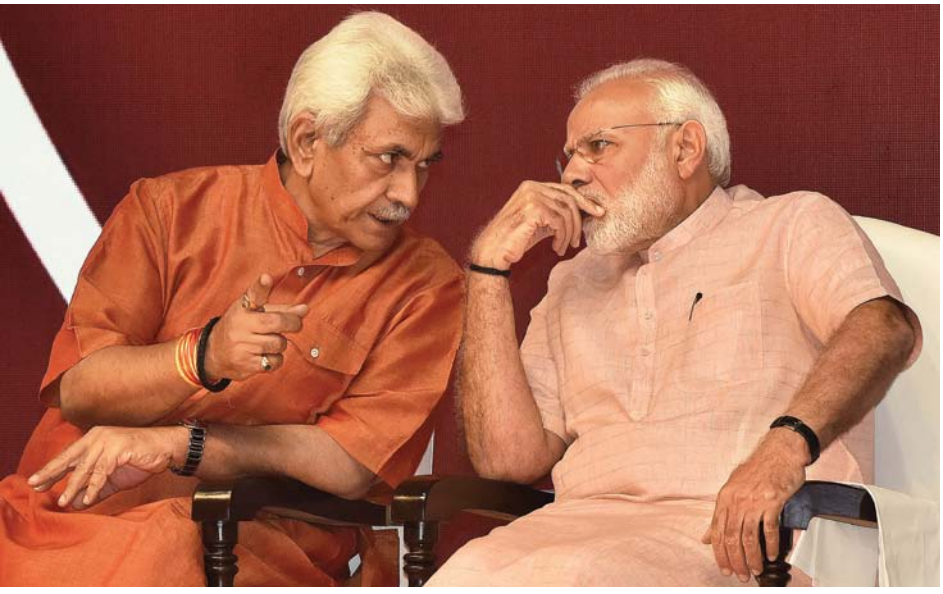
"Education and economy have suffered the most. I hope he can bring about a change, particularly in the education sector. We have to wait and watch. He has to gain the trust of the people," says Noor Ahmed Baba, Professor, Department of Politics and Governance, Central University of Kashmir.

Those who have known Sinha, a civil engineer and an alumnus of the Indian Institute of Technology (Banaras Hindu University), since his student days, say that, as a popular student leader, he had shown leadership qualities when he was doing his BTech in the early 1980s. It was in his nature to help any student, says BN Rai, Dean of Student Affairs, IIT (BHU), recalling his own experience. Rai had just joined as an MTech student when he had an accident. Sinha, senior to him and a stranger then, rushed him to hospital.

"*Samosa* used to be a big thing those days. He would treat everyone around to *samosas* though he got the same scholarship amount of Rs 600 as other students. He was very popular and had friends across parties," says Rai. In college, Sinha played volleyball, wore trousers and a shirt and always had a *shikha*, a common practice among Hindu men whereby a long tuft of hair is left on top of the head. Once he joined politics, he started wearing *dhoti* and *kurta*. Rai says that even during 2004-2014, when he was not an MP, he had as many visitors as when he was in Lok Sabha.

In 1989, Sinha, a Bhumihar from eastern UP, had filed his nomination from Ghazipur, his birthplace, for the first time. On the last day of withdrawal of nominations, he withdrew assuming the party was planning to put up some other candidate. But the BJP had decided on him. In the absence of a candidate, the BJP and Janata Dal backed an Independent, Jagdish Kushwaha, who won the election. Sinha won from Ghazipur in the 1996, 1999 and 2014 Lok Sabha elections. In 1999, during the Atal Bihari Vajpayee regime, he was named among the best performing parliamentarians. All through his terms in Lok Sabha, he used his entire fund from the Members of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme for his constituency. In 2019, when opposition parties, the Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), aligned to take on the BJP, he was offered to fight from another seat, but he refused saying that he had done development work in Ghazipur and would prefer to contest from there. Sinha, then Union telecom minister, lost to BSP's Afzal Ansari, gangster-turned-politician Mukhtar Ansari's brother. A

experienced leader. He has experience in public life That will be of great help. He comes from the party Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah



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PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA MODI AND MANOJ SINHA, DURING HIS STINT AS UNION TELECOM MINISTER, IN NEW DELHI

close aide says Sinha sees victory and defeat as part of politics and no one can ever make out what is going on in his mind.

He is now trying to reach out to the youth of J&K. A tweet by the official handle of the Department of Information and Public Relations (DIPR), J&K, on August 15th said: 'Lt Governor Manoj Sinha said that youth has the power of transformation, his own student life was marked with activism; he asked the youth of Jammu and Kashmir to direct their activism towards development as future leaders of the country.'

Sinha's biggest challenge is to mitigate the misgivings on the ground. Meanwhile, the Government plans to take forward a slew of development measures, including long-pending reforms, schemes for the underprivileged, strengthening grassroots democracy, Prime Minister's Development Project for infrastructure, which includes water and power for all and a road to every village, steps to improve trade and plans for a new industrial policy for the region, while containing militancy. As per official statistics, instances of stone-pelting came down to 389 in 2019 from 532 in 2018.

"Manoj Sinha is the fourth occupant of the Raj Bhavan in a little over two years. I doubt his proximity to Modi will make any difference by itself, unless Delhi discards the entrenched, notorious vested interests and reconstitutes the administrative apparatus in Kashmir forthwith," says political analyst Javed Iqbal Shah. While he acknowledges that Sinha might be taken more seriously than those before him, he is of the view that for any political activity to resume, some minimum confidence of the people in the administration and a semblance of governance and normalcy are foremost prerequisites.

"Administrators like NN Vohra and GC Saxena were non-political but their prior familiarity of Kashmir affairs, integrity and sound administrative acumen helped in creating conducive conditions for elections and the revival of political process in the past," Shah says.

Sinha is the second Governor in J&K after Malik with a political background. The region has been more or less under governors since 1586, when Mughals annexed the region, with brief stints of local governments.

After August 5th last year when Article 370 was scrapped, over 400 Kashmiri politicians and separatists were detained or arrested, including former Chief Ministers Mehbooba Mufti of the PDP and Farooq Abdullah and Omar Abdullah of the NC. Mufti continues to be in detention under the Jammu and Kashmir Public Safety Act. Omar Abdullah, released after eight months in detention, has said he will not take part in any future electoral process as long as it remains a Union Territory. Internet services were snapped hours before abrogation of the undivided state's special status. While 2G connections were restored on January 25th, 4G services were revived in two of the 20 districts of the Union Territory on August 17th.

Meanwhile, at the Raj Bhavan, in less than a fortnight into his new assignment, Sinha has held a spate of meetings, including one with representatives of the Kashmir Chamber of Commerce and Industry. During the interaction, he announced a committee to work out modalities for the economic revival of J&K and extend support to its business community. All eyes are on the Raj Bhavan. ■

Kamala Harris

A DEVI FOR THE OVAL?

By James Astill

Joe Biden's choice of Kamala Harris as running mate promises glory for Indian-Americans—but no special favours to India

THE RISE OF Indian-American politicians has been richly championed and celebrated by the assertive and hugely successful South Asian diaspora. But it is not something the first trailblazing politicos themselves were terribly keen to acknowledge. The lead pioneers, Piyush Jindal and Nimrata Haley, former Republican Governors of Louisiana and South Carolina, downplayed their Indian-ness in almost every way.

They changed their first names to 'Bobby' and 'Nikki' (the culturally ambiguous nickname Haley goes by). Both converted to Christianity, respectively from Hinduism and Sikhism. Both turned against the politics of openness and diversity that their success clearly exemplified. Ahead of his failed presidential run in 2016, Jindal, a son of Indian immigrants, rebranded himself as an immigration hawk and cultural warrior who was "done will all this talk about hyphenated Americans". Haley became a cabinet member and apologist for America's most openly racist president in decades, Donald Trump.

It might be tempting to see Senator Kamala Devi Harris in a similar light. Notwithstanding her given names, her adored 'Tam Brahm' mother from Chennai and her ability to cook a decent masala dosa (as YouTube viewers can attest), the 55-year-old Californian, who was named as Joe Biden's presidential running mate, has rarely made much of her Indian heritage.

She describes her late mother, Shyamala Gopalan, a biologist who moved to America for graduate studies in the early 1960s and died in 2009, as her greatest influence. Yet, she has embraced the culture and identity of her Jamaican-American father, Donald Harris. A Stanford University economist, Donald Harris divorced Gopalan when Kamala was seven and appears to have played a minimal role in her later upbringing. Yet, his African-American ethnicity is her preferred hyphenation.

She knows no Indian language. And despite her recent references to childhood visits to Chennai and her Indian grandparents there, she appears to retain little close connection to the country. While taking questions from an audience of Indian-Americans in Las Vegas earlier this year, during her own short-lived presidential campaign, Harris was asked whether she would consider wearing *desi* clothes at her presidential inauguration. She appeared astonished by the proposal; then said she would not.

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American-born *desis* should not take this personally. Harris' vantage on India and Indian-ness is quite different from Jindal's and Haley's. Indeed, where they sought to diminish their Asian ancestry as a career ploy, Harris has, if anything, come to seem 'more Asian' as she has ascended the ranks of American politics.

Her South Asian roots were weaker than those of her Republican counterparts from the start. In the ferment of 1960s Californian student politics, Gopalan and Donald Harris met and together threw themselves into the civil rights movement. And the young Indian researcher retained strong ties to black activism after her divorce. 'From almost the moment she arrived from India, she chose and was welcomed to and enveloped in the black community,' Harris wrote of her mother in her recent autobiography, *The Truths We Hold*. 'It was the foundation of her new American life.'

Her daughters, Kamala and her younger sister (and now close political advisor) Maya, provided an additional rationale for this. Gopalan understood that race-obsessed Americans would view them as black however the girls dressed or behaved. The concept of 'mixed race' barely exists in America and Indian-Americans were not widely recognised in the country back then: the community was only a couple of hundred thousand-strong. Gopalan, therefore, resolved to make her daughters pre-eminently comfortable with the identity America would insist upon. 'She was determined to make sure we would grow into confident, proud black women,' Harris recalled.

She and her sister attended civil rights marches from an early age, were left during Gopalan's frequent work travels with black neighbours and attended their church. The sisters also participated, along with other African-American children, in a controversial effort to desegregate schools by 'bussing' black pupils into neighbouring white school districts.

Kamala proceeded to America's most prestigious historically black college, Howard University in Washington, DC. When she first ran for elected office—as San Francisco's District Attorney—it was inevitably as a black politician. Several of her associates from that time have subsequently expressed surprise on learning of her South Asian ancestry. It seems it never even arose.

That it has since become widely known is in part testament to the vastly increased presence and influence of Indian-Americans. As their population has surged to over four million, they have graduated from Silicon Valley and Spelling Bees to political prominence. Until 2016, only four Indian-Americans had ever served in Congress. Yet, at least 30 contested primary elections that year; five now serve on Capitol Hill. And the US-Indian relationship has become commensurately more important, further magnifying the community's clout. Harris' South Asian heritage was never a secret; it was just something she didn't talk about, so others didn't ask her about it. There are a lot of people asking about, and celebrating, it now.

'Was there ever more of an exciting day?' the Indian-American actress Mindy Kaling tweeted in response to Biden naming Harris as his chosen deputy. For her and other Indian-Americans, this was a fulfilment of their community's flourishing in America. Yet their delight is widely shared. Harris is not only the first Asian-American chosen for a major-party national ticket. She is also the first black woman. She is the first Democratic presidential or vice presidential candidate from west of Texas (California's two Presidents, Ronald Reagan and Richard Nixon, were both Republican). Though not young exactly, she also represents a break with the older generation that dominates the Democrats, through Biden, his predecessor Hillary Clinton and the congressional leaders Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer.

In these several ways, she is being celebrated across the left as a pioneer. And the effect is mutually reinforcing. She has come to represent not so much this or that community, as diversity itself: melting-pot America. This is, in a sense, the mirror image of what Biden brought to Barack Obama's presidential ticket in 2008, as an older white man with a residual strain of social conservatism.

The inconsistency Harris showed on policy
her job is not to outline her own agenda but
offering. And she is amply up to that task.
campaigner. She is also experienced enough
help burnish the 77-year-old Biden's grand

Joe Biden and his running mate Kamala Harris in Wilmington, Delaware, August 12

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during her own campaign is now irrelevant; to support the broadly centrist one Biden is Harris is an attractive, charismatic to know when to draw back. Her task is to fatherly appeal; it is not to outshine him

His role back then was to reconcile older white Democrats to the party's first black nominee. Harris' now is to reassure younger non-white ones, especially women, that Biden's administration will be more forward-looking than they might fear.

Indeed, given his current strong polling lead over Trump, Biden's foremost need is to maintain unity within his party's diverse and often divided coalition. So long as he can do so, he has a strong chance of returning to the White House that he occupied for eight years under Obama. Gratifying for the Democrats, therefore, Harris is turning out to be a popular choice; 83 per cent of Democrats say she is an excellent or good fit.

Notwithstanding the novelties of her new position, this is despite the fact that she was in some ways a cautious choice. She is not exactly a centrist, as some have called her. Her voting record in Congress is fairy leftwing. Yet that chiefly reflects the prevailing views of her increasingly deep-blue state. When Californians were less leftist (a mere decade or so ago, such is the pace at which demographic change is re-orienting American politics), so was Harris. As a former prosecutor, most notoriously, she forged an early reputation for being tough on petty crime, a position many Democrats now decry as heartless and potentially racist. In her flickering presidential campaign, too, she showed similar pragmatism.

MISJUDGING THE MOOD of her party, she entered its primary contest earlier this year as a self-proclaimed radical, promising sweeping healthcare and other reforms. Yet, once it became apparent that most Democrats over-ridingly wanted to beat Trump and considered radicalism a distraction or even an obstacle in the way of that goal, she changed course. This perhaps makes her vulnerable to a charge of opportunism. But pragmatism in the pursuit of victory, which is opportunism by another name, is what most Democratic voters crave—as their selection of Biden, a respected but unexciting presidential candidate, clearly indicated.

This also makes Harris' political skills look helpful to him. The inconsistency she showed on policy during her own campaign is now irrelevant; her job is not to outline her own agenda but to support the broadly centrist one Biden is offering. And she is amply up to that task. Harris is an attractive and a charismatic campaigner. She is engaging in a way that, for example, Hillary Clinton's chosen deputy, Tim Kaine, another likeable but unexciting Democratic moderate, never was. She is also experienced enough to know when to draw back. Her task is to help burnish the 77-year-old Biden's grandfatherly appeal; it is not to outshine him.

Drawing on her courtroom experience, she is also an articulate and tough debater who will not be cowed by the slurs Trump and his cronies are already throwing at her. (The President has aired a palpably bogus conspiracy theory that, as the child of immigrants, Harris is not eligible to be vice president.)

Notwithstanding these strengths, she is unlikely to have a material impact on the result of the election. Presidential running mates almost never do. There is some evidence that they can boost the candidate's prospects in their home state. Yet California was already safely in the bag for Biden, with or without Harris on board. Even so, she looks much more like a potential asset to Biden than a liability—as, for example, Sarah Palin, an embarrassingly callow Republican Governor, was to John McCain in 2008. And that in itself speaks well of the Democrat's judgement.

Especially as the most memorable moment of her short-lived presidential campaign was when she attacked Biden for his past opposition to 'bussing' as a means of desegregation. It was one of the most jarring moments of the entire primary contest. By picking Harris, Biden appears to have turned it into an opportunity, however. One of the main arguments for his candidacy was that he was uniquely able to reconcile the Democratic coalition. His apparent willingness to set Harris' barbed comments aside might seem to underline that promise.

Indian-Americans are within an imaginable short series of steps from making it to the Oval Office. Yet, Kamala Harris' membership of their tribe comes with qualifications. She appears scarcely to have registered it until fairly recently. She has also shown no particular interest in US-India policy—and even less encouragement to the current BJP government in New Delhi

For generally left-leaning Indian-Americans, Harris represents a sort of trade-off. She is one of their own—and therefore a symbol of their community's remarkable rise to the heights of American business, media, entertainment and politics. She also represents promise of an even greater prize. *The Economist*'s election forecast model, based on a vast assortment of polling and other data, suggests Biden currently has an 87 per cent chance of beating Trump in November. And if he does, he has already suggested he would want to make Harris an unusually high-powered deputy.

IN A JOINT APPEARANCE with her last week, he said: "I asked Kamala to be the last voice in the room. To always tell me the truth, which she will. Challenge my assumptions if she disagrees. Ask the hard question. Because that's the way we make the best decisions for the American people." This was essentially the role—of chief presidential truth-teller and confidant—that he played for Obama. It gave him a prominence on the left that he is leveraging still. And if Harris played her cards right, it might put her even closer to the top job than it did him.

If elected in November, Biden would be the oldest first-time president. As such, he might well decline to run for a second term. In the normal run of things, this would make Harris the favourite to succeed him. No wonder her unveiling on the Democratic ticket made Kaling giddy. Indian-Americans are within an imaginable short series of steps from making it to the Oval Office. Yet, Harris' membership of their tribe does come with qualifications.

As noted, she appears scarcely to have registered it until fairly recently. She has also shown no particular interest in US-India policy—and even less encouragement to the current BJP Government in New Delhi. Back in October 2019, after it revoked the special status of Indian-administered Kashmir, she issued this warning: "We are watching."

That reflects the prevailing sentiment towards India among most mainstream Democrats. They are robustly behind the bipartisan and decades-long policy of ever-closer US-India ties. They would also be expected to treat the bilateral relationship less carelessly than the Trump administration has, on trade especially. Yet, they would probably be more hectoring and outspoken in their criticisms of the Narendra Modi Government, on civil liberties in Kashmir and otherwise. And, in the event of a Biden-Harris administration, Harris' Indian ancestry would not make a jot of difference

(L-R) Kamala Harris, her sister Maya and mother Shyamala Gopalan outside their apartment in Berkeley, California, January 1970

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to that. Biden would call the shots on foreign policy. And even if he did not, Harris would be unlikely to diverge from the centre-left consensus on US-India diplomacy. Asked to choose between the broad sentiment of her party and lobbying from the pro-BJP Indian-American lobby, she would go with her party every time.

Indian-Americans could not claim to be let down by this: Harris has given them no reason to expect otherwise. But lest any come to feel underserved by her, they might console themselves with this intriguing—in fact, rather astonishing—possibility.

Among the Republicans who are already jostling to succeed Trump, Haley is very much in the mix. And if the President were to lead his party to a bad defeat in November, it might well turn to her brand of conservative moderation. That would push her even further to the head of the Republican pack. It is, therefore, not at all hard to imagine America's presidential election four years from now as a choice between two Indian-American women. ■

James Astill is the Washington bureau chief and Lexington columnist for The Economist. *He is a contributor to* Open

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EKTA KAP

**Her once venerated domestic goddesses
She tells KAVEREE BAMZAI why it is**

▶ Ekta Kapoor

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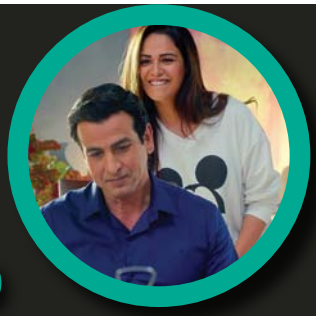

A scene from *Kehne Ko Humsafar Hain*

and happy homes are no longer picture-perfect. important to keep up with the times

IF EKTA KAPOOR'S television universe in 2000 locked up the woman at home, put her on a pedestal, and threw away the key, leaving all the business to the suave man of the world, the 2020 universe created by her streaming service, ALTBalaji, has inverted that algorithm. In 2000, it was all about women they could relate to and men they could fantasise about. Now, though, man-children are in the throes of arrested development, borrowing money from their mothers, while grown-up women of the world obsess about making their own fortunes at work and running their homes on their own terms.

You could call it karma. In 2000, Ekta Kapoor's soaps on Star Plus took women back into the home from which they had escaped, some to live in singleton splendour in *Tara* on Zee TV, others to breathe the freedom of divorce in *Saans* on Star Plus. Where women had shown even in the late 1980s that they could become IPS officers (*Udaan*) or social activists (*Rajni*), at the beginning of the millennium, Kapoor remade them as domestic goddesses and nothing more. Educated, professional and independent women were marginalised, those who practised the dark arts of kitchen politics were given centre stage.

So it's only fair that she is the power behind new streaming series such as *Kehne Ko Humsafar Hain* in which the institution of marriage takes such a beating that the central male character tries it (almost) thrice and *Mentalhood* in which a character spells it out, just in case, we missed it: "*Saas-bahu* fights are 20 years old. Today's war is between stay-at-home moms and working moms."

Twenty years on, Ekta Kapoor's empire of stories stretches from television to movies to streaming series. The world that Balaji Telefilms constructed for viewers, with K-series upon K-series, is slowly unravelling with her desi digital alter ego, ALTBalaji. Reflecting the country's changing urban reality, Kapoor is striving to give women back the freedom her soaps denied them for two decades: the liberty to choose work over home, divorce over marriage, and elegant jumpsuits over blingy sarees. And yes, arguments now end in cutting words rather than stinging slaps, repeated thrice.

In this universe, fortysomething women can contemplate babies through surrogacy to bring joy to their much younger second husbands, fiftysomething fathers of two married women can yearn to change nappies and mop up puke for their new babies with their second wives.

The reason for this change could be, a steady growth in production of serials for television, cutting-edge movies such as *Udta Punjab* (2016) and *Lipstick under My Burkha* (2017) made as co-productions, and a three-year-old streaming service, which is now one of the top five OTT platforms in the country. All this and with an ear to the ground in creating a more relatable woman for OTT. Where once, on TV, the woman had no choice but to suffer silently as her husband took a lover or transformed into Mad Mata with a gun when her son raped his wife, she can now, in *Kehne Ko Humsafar Hain*, take herself off with her unborn baby and move to another life in another country. Where once the woman had no choice but to put up with a habitually drunk husband, she can now treat him like the man child he is in *Karrle Tu BhiMohabbat* (2017-). As Kapoor says, "You have to evolve in your approach towards your work and observation of things happening in society. You have to change with the changing times and try to reflect those changes through your shows, movies, and web series."

Ekta has always confused her critics. Those who would want to praise her for her independent entrepreneurial achievements feel let down by the way she represents women, while those who endorse her traditionalism are uncomfortable by her unorthodox personal life. As a single mother who has had a child by surrogacy, Kapoor stands out as an empowered, liberated woman who is creating her own modern version of the family unit. There are other contradictions: a child of superstar Jeetendra, she has been at the forefront of introducing new talent into the television industry, from a young Smriti Irani as Tulsi Virani to a young Sushant Singh Rajput as Manav in *Pavitra Rishta*. As Kapoor says, "I have always been hugely supportive of talent—be it actors, writers, or directors. Before signing them, we don't see if he/she belongs to Bollywood or from some other part of the country but how talented he or she is and stands true to their respective craft."

Then there is the risque aspect of ALTBalaji's series, which includes clearly exploitative stories such as *XXX* and

A scene from *Mentalhood*

A scene from *Karrle Tu Bhi Mohabbat*

Gandi Baat. Kapoor prefers to call it content that is versatile and relatable with the mass audience and has a universal appeal. ALTBalaji shows, she says, "Are a healthy mix of thriller, drama, romance, youth drama, horror, comedy amongst others. Each show present on the platform or in the pipeline, has been created keeping in mind the audience's interest across demographic and sociographic segments. Though thriller and action genres are the popular ones among the male audience, we have also witnessed an interesting trend, where male viewers are extensively consuming shows like *Mentalhood* which is based on motherhood, the teenage drama *lass of 2020* and *It Happened in Calcutta* amongst others." This raciness, however, doesn't endear her to the rightwing constituency, which would normally have been her greatest votaries.

The controversies tend to obscure Ekta's innate talent for giving the audience what they want to watch. So even as the OTT giants Amazon and Netflix focus on the big cities, she has decided to steer her entertainment towards other cities, and has commissioned 57 shows in the next 18 months between Balaji and content partner *ZEE5*. There are movies lined up, TV shows that are running and the OTT platform has 62 original web series already in the library. In 2020 alone, the publicly listed parent company Balaji Telefilms (of which the family owns 34.3 per cent) produced 823 hours of content. ALTBalaji has seen a 100 per cent rise in its subscription base every year in the last three years. CEO Nachiket Pantvaidya says: "Fifty-six per cent of our consumers are from the non-metro and tier-II/tier-III towns. This rise in viewership is a growing testament to the huge untapped tier-II, III and IV markets for OTT players."

It helps to have structured R&D, with detailed analytics that track consumer lifetime value (LTV), user data and generate behavioural patterns, especially from users' drop-off on registration flow. Says Pantvaidya, "In order to provide viewers with an enhanced and seamless viewing experience, we designed the app to have minimum clicks and were able to reduce drop-offs by a substantial percentage. We have also seen deeper engagement of the platform with consumers watching more shows during the lockdown including older library content."

> "YOU HAVE TO CHANGE WITH THE CHANGING TIMES AND TRY TO REFLECT THOSE CHANGES THROUGH YOUR SHOWS, MOVIES, AND WEB SERIES"
> **Ekta Kapoor** producer

She has her critics too. Filmmaker and creator of the popular *Tara*, Vinta Nanda, says, "She's in the numbers game, which oscillates between a censorious moral attitude towards self-indulgence and absolute surrender to base sexual behaviour among characters; be they criminally correct or not. Her storytelling style is very hyper and unapologetic about remaining focused on the bottom line to keep her shareholders happy. Change can only come when she puts her weight behind progressive storytelling, which doesn't need to depend on regressive behaviours, crime or sex to carry a narrative forward from one scene to the next."

Kapoor denies that she looks at everything made by the studio. She says, "There are professional teams at the job headed by creative directors and it is practically and humanly impossible to watch everything." But her actors vouch for her creative insights. Mona Singh who plays Ananya aka Wife No 2 in *Kehne Ko Humsafar Hain* says the cast insists on listening to the voice notes that Kapoor gives the creative teams during meetings. Gurdeep Kohli, who plays Poonam, Wife No 1, in the same series, says her handwritten insights scribbled on the margins of their scripts can alter the ethos of entire scenes.

The 45-year-old is famously a stickler for her vision. When she felt the second half of one of her biggest movie hits, *Once upon a Time in Mumbaai* (2010), wasn't working, she got the high-powered cast (which included Ajay Devgn, Emraan Hashmi, Kangana Ranaut, et-cetera) to drop everything else they were doing and reshot 20 per cent of the film.

Despite being in the public eye for 20 years, Kapoor has remained quite enigmatic, rationing her public appearances partly on account of being a nervous speaker and partly because of a deep-seated insecurity about her body. She has allowed the urban legends to build around her, whether it is the number of rings she wears on her fingers (when she takes them off, even that makes news), her weekly visits to Siddhivinayak temple in Mumbai or her 3 AM meetings.

But her laidback, shaggy-haired public persona can't conceal her shrewd brain, which she feeds with smart reading and smarter visual snacking. She is constantly updating her knowledge and sharpening her instinct, and when she says hers is a company that makes millionaires, not mere millions, she means it. Her shows have created an army of new stars, resurrected the careers of others, and generated a slew of writers and directors for a more democratised world of storytelling. ■

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Imperial Inheritance

Has the empire been the default model for global governance?

By Zareer Masani

THE APPEARANCE OF yet another tract on empire in the present global climate might seem like an act of hubris. Samir Puri's *The Great Imperial Hangover* goes even further in trying to encapsulate 5,000 years of world history in 300 pages. The result is well written, intelligent and gripping, but inevitably itself suffers from the imperial overstretch which Puri rightly blames for the collapse of so many empires.

This survey of imperialism and its continuing relevance begins very sensibly by reminding us 'empires are still shaping the 21st century in profound ways', even though we live in 'the first empire-free millennium in world history'. Puri himself is not a historian but a political scientist, and his avowed purpose is 'to unlock many of the most troublesome conundrums in contemporary global affairs'. He sees imperial expansion as a near-universal, often positive human urge to promote order, trade, modernity and culture. 'If empires had not existed,' he argues, 'it would have been necessary to invent something like them....'

Given his preoccupation with contemporary problem-solving, Puri, not surprisingly, begins by examining the informal empire that still bestrides the world, that of the US. 'I never knew a man who had better motives for all the trouble he caused,' wrote Graham Greene in his novel *The Quiet American*. Puri quotes both Barack Obama and Donald Trump on America's role as 'the world's reluctant sheriff'. He traces the paradox of US neo-imperialism emerging out of America's birth in revolt against British colonialism, then swallowing Native and Spanish American territories, then intervening decisively in two, European-initiated World Wars and, less successfully, in Vietnam and Iraq.

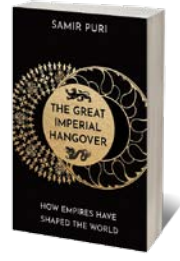
Pointing to Obama's neglect of his own red lines in Syria, Puri rightly concludes that the US 'finds it is damned if it does and damned if it doesn't get involved in the world's problems'. He also explodes the American independence myth by reminding us that its war of independence was also it first civil war, with large sections still loyal to the British Crown. His thumbnail sketch of American history wisely warns: 'Repudiating and then effectively replicating empire embedded a paradox deep into the American psyche.' He shrewdly observes that the 20th century US was able to project its soft power worldwide because new telecommunications and broadcast media allowed this.

Puri is less accurate or even-handed in his account of the British Empire which the American eventually succeeded. He rightly points to British imperial overstretch by the 20th century, but attributes its collapse to the Second World War, not the First, which was arguably even more decisive in beginning the imperial handover to America. He dismisses the peaceful decolonisation of Hong Kong and so many other British possessions in favour of a childish joke about flag-flying by the comedian Eddie Izzard. He also takes seriously ill-sourced, anti-British polemics by Shashi Tharoor, although agreeing with Niall Ferguson, whom he otherwise dismisses: 'The British Empire undoubtedly diffused institutions and ideas that remain with us, wiring together distant parts of the globe in a preview of modern globalisation.'

Where Puri is on even thinner ice is in suggesting that the imperial legacy, buried deep in Britain's collective unconscious, resurfaced after 9/11 in encouraging the UK to play Athens to America's Rome. Hence Blair's enthusiasm for the 2003 Iraq War, conveniently attributed to 'absent-minded' imperial hangover, instead of his own messianic instincts. The British vote for Brexit is similarly attributed to a subconscious, imperialist urge to go it alone, not to the Euroscepticism of a generation that has grown up in the European Union. In neither case does Puri come up with evidence, just a hunch, for which he hastily denies causal claims.

From Brexit Puri turns to the European Union itself, pointing to the fact that past empires and resistance to them lie deep in the European DNA, both fuelling post-imperial aims and undermining them. As a former President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso, once commented: "Now we have... the first non-imperial empire... Twenty-seven countries that freely decided to work together, to pool their sovereignties." With its roots far back in ancient Greece and Rome, a more recent European empire was the Holy Roman Empire, a loose confederation of mainly German kingdoms, held together by the dynastic glue of the Habsburg monarchy. The Habsburg empire had evolved into a highly diverse, cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic grouping in which several national groups ranging from Austro-Germans to Jews, Hungarians and Slavs co-habited fairly peacefully in many regions.

The fall of the Habsburg monarchy in World War I and the new post-war application of the



THE GREAT IMPERIAL HANGOVER
HOW EMPIRES HAVE SHAPED THE WORLD
Samir Puri

Atlantic Books
384 Pages | Rs 2,208

The Secret of England's Greatness
(Queen Victoria presents a Bible)
by Thomas Jones Barker, c 1862

PAST COLONIALISM BY EUROPEANS, SOME MORE BENEVOLENT THAN OTHERS, HAS BEEN A TWO-WAY PROCESS, IN WHICH THE COLONISERS HAVE EXPORTED THEIR LANGUAGES AND CULTURES ACROSS OTHER CONTINENTS, WHILE THEMSELVES IMPORTING FOREIGN PROFITS AND MIGRANTS

principle of national self-determination tore apart these mixed communities, rewarded ethnic cleansing and fuelled waves of extreme nationalism, typified by the rise of Nazism in Germany. Like Napoleon's France a century earlier, Nazi Germany could be seen as an attempt forcibly to unite Europe's nations under the yoke of a single, dominant imperial ruler. The post-war European settlement attempted to guard against such domination ever being repeated.

'The EU is not an empire,' Puri concedes, 'but in its commitment to unification between its members, and to enlargement with new members, it has acquired quasi-imperial habits... It is a modern, democratic inheritor of imperial legacies...' He points to the fact that past colonialism by Europeans, some more benevolent than others, has been a two-way process, in which the colonisers have exported their languages and cultures across other continents, while themselves importing foreign profits and migrants. The EU, he argues, is 'reminiscent of a civilising mission, this time predicated on promoting peace, democracy and good economic practices...'. A 'Europeans know best' attitude, inherited from past empires, has produced an irritating tendency to preach to others, but may result in modern Europe feeling increasingly isolated in today's multi-polar world.

Europe's most direct challenge today comes from the neighbouring land empire of Russia, with which its relationship has been ambivalent for centuries. 'A Russian is self-assured,' wrote the great Leo Tolstoy, 'just because he knows nothing and does not want to know anything, since he does not believe that anything can be known.' Puri quotes this as a telling comment on the Russian Empire, which has straddled both Europe and Asia for four centuries, whether under the Romanov monarchy, Soviet Communism or the current Putin regime.

Having been part of an international mission on Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine, Puri concludes that part of the problem is that past empires had flexible frontiers, not today's hard borders. But it's hard to see what practical difference this made when Russia's empress Catherine the Great annexed Crimea and Ukraine in the 18th century. Maps, however disputed, were a feature of all modern empires. Puri rightly observes that Russia's annexation of Central Asian, Muslim lands was similar to Western Europe's acquisition of overseas colonies. Having briefly

achieved independence after the Bolshevik takeover of 1917, these small, subject nations were forced back into the Soviet fold during the 1920s, regained formal independence after 1990, but remain clients of their large Russian neighbour today.

Although the end of the Soviet Union left the world free of formal empire, Puri is in no doubt that Putin's global muscle-flexing and interventions are part of 'the gravitational pull' of its imperial past. China, he points out, is in much the same position, though it can claim it has not waged war on its neighbours. The Tibetans, the Uighurs and India might disagree. Though never directly colonised, China can claim to have been plundered by others, notably the British in the Opium Wars. The result is a toxic mix of imperial ambitions with a deep sense of anti-Western grievance.

After a whirlwind tour of China's imperial and Communist past, Puri identifies its current, innocent-sounding 'Belt and Road Initiative' as a classic imperialist system to gather cheap natural resources from other African and Asian countries, who then depend on China for their own economic survival. Surprisingly, Puri does not apply similar imperialist motives to India, as though two centuries of British rule had eradicated two millennia of indigenous imperialism, dating at least as far back as the Mauryan Empire of the 2nd century BCE.

While celebrating the achievements of India's past empires, whether Hindu or Muslim, Puri seems to assume that the imperial impulse ended with nationalist resistance to the British Raj. What that ignores is that the imperial mission of the Raj, like it or not, united *all* India for the first time in its history as a centralised state with a pan-Indian civil service and army and a single common market. Of course, most of that occurred through wars of imperial annexation by the British, but their indigenous nationalist heirs were quick to assume the same imperial paramountcy over 540 notionally independent princely states, to crush with brutal military force secessionist movements in subject nations like Kashmir, Nagaland and Mizoram, and to impose the Raj's uniform systems of language, administration, justice and finance as strictly as their predecessors. The result has been a successor-state every bit as imperial in its rituals and political practice as the Raj or the Chinese model Puri and the rest of us like to decry.

India's imperial impulses have been sometimes less visible because cloaked in a rhetoric of Gandhian non-violence. But Gandhi's pacifism has in no way prevented India's no-holds-barred wars with Pakistan in 1948, 1965 and 1971, or in its nuclear arms race. Surprisingly, Puri's somewhat rosy history of India includes several factual inaccuracies. The sepoy mutiny of 1857 was patently not 'accompanied by mass civil unrest'. The last Mughal emperor, far from trying 'to capitalise on the unrest', was forced by the rebels to become their reluctant and nominal figurehead. There was no 'mass drafting' of Indians into Britain's World War I army. British India had no conscription, but nevertheless supplied the world's largest volunteer/mercenary army, made up predominantly of the so-called martial races, who had been professional soldiers for generations. The 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin, which inspired Indian nationalists, was not a rebellion by veterans but an extremist putsch that was highly unpopular with most Dubliners, especially the angry wives of the many hundreds of thousands of Irish troops loyally fighting in France for King and Empire.

Puri swallows several Indian nationalist founding myths. Contrary to his assertion, no machine-guns were used in the notorious Jallianwala massacre of 1919. Gandhi never offered Jinnah 'the chance to form the first independent government' of India, nor was he ever in a position to do so, although he did moot this as a half-serious suggestion in talks with Viceroy Lord Mountbatten, who promptly dismissed the idea as a ploy unacceptable to the rest of Congress. Bringing India's political evolution up to the present era of Hindu chauvinism, Puri strangely concludes that India has been a victim of imperialism rather than its inheritor, 'a survivor of other people's imperial designs'.

Turning to the Middle East, there are again some factual

Narendra Modi at an election campaign road show in Varanasi, April 2019

SAMIR PURI EVEN ATTRIBUTES NARENDRA MODI'S LANDSLIDE IN THE 2019 ELECTION TO 'POST-IMPERIAL UNEASE', INSTEAD OF INDIA'S OWN HOME-GROWN, HINDU-DOMINATED NEO-IMPERIALISM

GETTY IMAGES

errors, probably inevitable in such a wide-ranging account of its colourful history under empires as diverse as the Byzantines and the Ottomans. We are told that Reza Shah, who established Iran's Pahlavi monarchy in 1921, 'did not pursue a Westernizing agenda akin to Attaturk's' in neighbouring Turkey, although precisely the opposite is true, and his Westernising agenda continued under his son, the tragic last Shah. We are told that that the Egyptian dictator 'Nasser's high point' came 'with nationalization of the Aswan Dam', surely the Suez Canal.

WHERE PURI IS correct is in reminding us of Jewish religious freedom under the Muslim Ottomans and concluding: 'There is no inevitable hostility between Jews and Muslims, but while both communities may have been able to fit into an empire, clearly it has not been possible to fit them into a state.' He even credits ISIS with an 'embryonic' empire-building project in abrogating the border between Syria and Iraq. He reminds us that 'the iconography of ISIS laid claim to a distant Islamic imperial past…'.

When it comes to Africa, even more than India, Puri seems to swallow uncritically the entire anti-colonial gospel of a continent innocent of original sin, plundered, ravaged and enslaved by wicked European colonists. While accepting that colonialism 'is not the only cause of Africa's contemporary problems', he quotes a Cameroonian academic to say that 'the gift of modernity (by the West) was poisoned by the giver'. Puri spares us no condemnation of the European-led transatlantic slave trade, but he does not examine the roots of that trade in Africa's indigenous traditions of slavery, enforced by its own tribal kingdoms on those they conquered and later in their often lucrative transactions with European slavers. Nor does he differentiate between European and Arab colonisation of Africa, or between the European powers themselves, exemplified by Western condemnation of Italy's invasion of Ethiopia. After all, it was to Britain that Africa's only indigenous emperor Haile Selassie fled in the 1930s to escape Mussolini.

Despite his censure of all European colonialism, Puri paradoxically blames it for ending its rule 'before Africa's independence movements could really cohere'. So they were damned if they did or didn't. While the new African states and borders undoubtedly owed their origin to colonial accident, the tribalism, corruption, wars and dictatorships that succeeded Western rule can hardly all be blamed on those colonial origins. Referring to the failed state of Congo, Puri says: 'While responsibility for his misrule clearly rests with his own indulgences, Mobutu was also a product of colonial legacies. Although it is an oversimplification to offload the blame to Belgium, Mobutu seemed to mimic the behaviour of King Leopold through his one-man rule….' And yet, the harsh reality is that, according to basic indicators of health, nutrition and civil liberties, several African states were better off under European colonialism than under their indigenous successors.

Referring to independent Sudan's dictatorships and famines, Puri concludes that it is 'ahistorical' to use the jargon of 'state failure', and he insists instead on the importance of colonial legacies. But nowhere does he spell out how pre-colonial Africa, with its 'blurred', traditional centres of power would have resolved such tensions more peacefully. Indeed, all the evidence is that pre-colonial life, far from a rural idyll, was, to quote Hobbes, nasty, brutish and short, except in those regions like Ethiopia, Ghana, Mali and Zimbabwe, where African kingdoms established stable empires of their own. A contemporary paradox which Puri attributes to their post-colonial subconscious, is the desire of so many millions of young, would be economic migrants to travel to the European countries that once ruled their grandparents.

Reflecting on Africa's new imperial patron, China, Puri calls the Chinese involvement 'transactional rather than colonial', though it's not clear what the difference amounts to. 'China', Puri explains, 'is hungry for resources that African countries are willing to sell. In a quid pro quo, China offers its African client states investment in roads, railways, ports and factories.' It's a recipe familiar to any student of imperialism, and Puri concedes that 'the dangers of dependency are real, based on China's debt-fuelled model of infrastructure provision.' Where he's on thinner ice is in the curious suggestion that China might be offering Africa political lessons in retaining established leaders, the older the better, which might produce less coups than the attempts at democracy left behind by Europeans.

Returning to the bigger global picture, there is little doubt that empire has been the default mode of governance for the world across the millennia, everywhere from Aztec Mexico to Japan, driven by basic human instincts for secure borders, economic prosperity and political kudos. 'Every one of us,' says Puri, 'carries an imperial inheritance that is personal to them.' Very true, but it's hard to see, as he suggests, that those imperial legacies are driving everything from Anglo-Russian tensions over Russian chemical attacks on British soil to Britain's own vote for Brexit. Puri even attributes Narendra Modi's landslide in the 2019 election to 'post-imperial unease', instead of India's own home-grown, Hindu-dominated neo-imperialism.

Where Puri is perceptive is in concluding that Chinese imperialism, unlike the West's version, doesn't expect its clients to convert to its civilisation. The West's desire to be mimicked, he predicts, will stiffen its resistance to Chinese influence. One must also agree with him that, while ethnic mixing has been one of the most enduring legacies of empire, the world's cosmopolitan 'travelling elite' are unlikely to convert the masses who stay home. Nor are culturally homogeneous nation-states likely to wither away. As Russia, China and India all demonstrate, imperial legacies can be preserved at their national core and used to reinforce new forms of imperial hubris. Imperialism and nationalism have never been mutually exclusive. Nazi Germany remains a potent reminder that the two can be a toxic combination. ■

Zareer Masani is a historian and broadcaster. He is the author of Macaulay: Pioneer of India's Modernisation

Rage against the Machine

Urjit Patel provides a critique of fiscal overreach

By Rohit Chandra

Urjit Patel

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

THE 'ANGRY YOUNG MAN' was a common trope in 1970s Indian cinema, best personified in Amitabh Bachchan's memorable roles in movies like *Deewar* (1975), *Kaala Patthar* (1979) and *Sholay* (1975). These movies were about men raging against an unjust system, a system which forever takes turns to thwart their best intentions at equity and justice for the common man. Reading between the lines, *Overdraft: Saving the Indian Saver* reads like a heavily subdued raging against an unjust machine by someone who has seen the good, the bad and the ugly of the financial system from its commanding heights.

At the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), Patel was known for his righteousness and ire against footdragging, underperforming bureaucrats and bankers in private and for his curt, authoritative, laconic, logical style in public engagements. This book is mostly the latter, with the former leaking through small windows. This book is far from a tell-all regarding Patel's RBI tenure. Rather, it is a critique of fiscal overreach by the Government of India. Specifically, it describes the waves of intended financial reforms (such as the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code and Prompt Corrective Action) and the counterwaves of resistance from interest groups, such as bankers and large borrowers, started feeling the heat.

Patel is not the central character of this book (the pronoun 'I' is conspicuously missing throughout the book except in the preface). In fact there are no characters at all. This is a book about institutions, not individuals.

Understandably wary in its style, Patel makes a number of observations about the Indian banking system which is remarkably blunt for someone who used to run one of the largest central banks in the world.

The premise of this book is that the Government's fiscal indiscipline has spilled over to the banking system and is leading to the latter's destabilisation by deploying public sector banks' (PSBs) funds in inefficient, imprudent ways. He calls out the political appointment of PSB boards and top executives whose incentives are more aligned to raising capital and riding out their tenure, than to genuinely reforming their organisations. He highlights the intellectual inconsistency and ignorance of basic commercial realities in the National Company Law Tribunal and other judicial rulings in enabling prolonged periods of institutional discretion over quick rulebased loan classification systems (a profoundly unjust outcome). He admits to a blocking coalition of PSB officials and large borrowers in the business community who together stymied large systemic changes in financial regulation and 'loot[ed] the country's future'. The RBI is also not spared, described as a 'soft regulator' constantly looking over its shoulder.

OVERDRAFT
SAVING THE INDIAN SAVER
Urjit Patel

HarperCollins
248 Pages | Rs 599

And towards the end of his book, after some more academic detours, he makes a strong case for lowering the PSB share of overall lending over time, given that the regulatory system already gives them many, many undue advantages.

After reading this book, one cannot help but feel the pull of the short leash given to India's central bankers these days. Patel is at his academic best when talking about policy trilemmas, constrained optimisation and the moral hazards that arise from government actions. But the book also reflects how little political and policy space is given to central bankers who do not play within the sandbox provided to them. One wonders whether a more personal approach—focusing on relationships, building goodwill and favour-trading—is the only way to run public institutions in such an environment.

Despite the extended title of this book, it is crystal clear that small Indian savers cannot do anything to save themselves. The millions of Indians with fixed deposits and savings accounts have no role in this book except as the aggrieved masses who have no hope from avenues of consumer advocacy. At least the angry young men in 1970s Bollywood could strike, mobilise and express their discontent to their unjust oppressors. The Indian saver cannot even do that. They just have to keep watching the movie, knowing that a happy ending is unlikely. ■

BLAND FANATICS
LIBERALS, RACE AND EMPIRE
Pankaj Mishra

Juggernaut
224 Pages | Rs 599

Pankaj Mishra's Protest

The impossibility of creating utopias

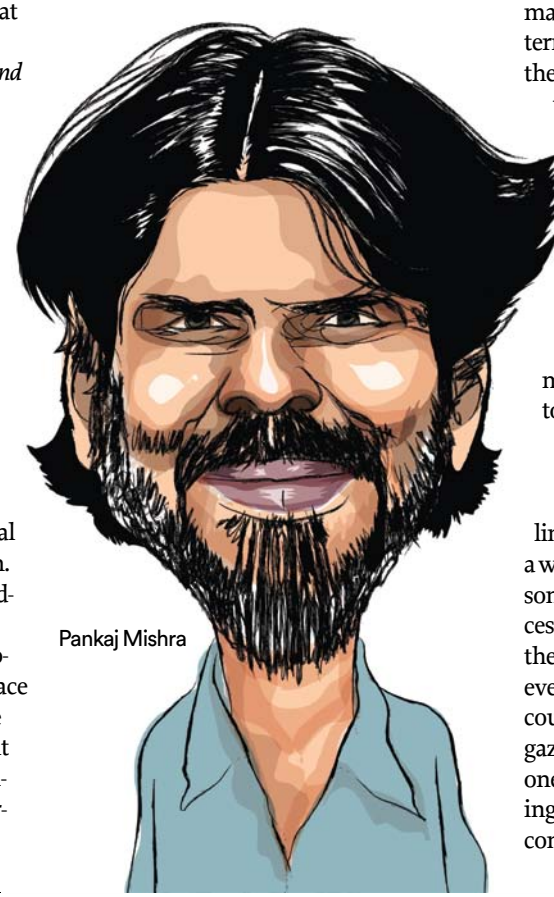
By Siddharth Singh

THE LIST IS impressive. In a span of 200-odd pages, Pankaj Mishra has taken potshots at the who's who of the intellectual world and beyond. Historian Niall Ferguson, *The Economist*, the late Milton Friedman, India's 'military occupation' of Kashmir, Islamophobia and, his new fascination, the failure of Western Liberalism.

After reading the book one doesn't know what survives. Indian capitalism cohabits with social Darwinism in Mumbai; Brexiteers have made a colossal error that Britain will pay for dearly; Western Liberalism—and its historians—has successfully hidden its bloodsoaked history; and other woeful tales abound in the book. Liberalism can be salvaged but the 'how' of doing that eludes Mishra.

What can one say except that *Bland Fanatics: Liberals, Race and Empire* is a book of angry essays that leaves one dazed.

At one time, not adhering to a set of ideas, ideology or outlook was considered a mark of intellectual purity. Mishra belongs to that school. That was also the time when intellectuals were arbiters of good taste, the bounds of human possibilities and, in some cases, even moral acceptability. It was also a much simpler world. In the years between 1950 and 1991, only two rival ideologies had any real space: Communism and Capitalism. To be sure, there were forms of Third-Worldism—Nehruvian Socialism, African variants and assorted ideologies—but these never had much space on the world canvas. With 1991, the field became constricted to the point that only one 'ism' survived: Capitalism. To that was grafted a very different ideology: Liberalism. For all the ideological baggage tied to Capitalism, it was first and foremost a system of decentralised production, distribution and consumption. Liberalism, on the other hand, was more an idea up in the air until that point. It had a historical lineage that went back to Benjamin Constant (1767-1830) and even further to John Locke (1632-1704). There was a parallel American version dating to James Madison (1751-1836). But right until the end of the Cold War, no one thought it would become a governing principle with its own manual of acceptable and unacceptable practices. By the end of the first decade of the 21st century, Liberalism, too, was in trouble.



Pankaj Mishra

Illustration by **SAURABH SINGH**

This was waiting to happen as the ideology had acquired the trappings of a bastardised theology. But unlike an original theology, it lacked a spiritual core, something that did not escape the sight of people-at-large.

Might Mshra's idea of freewheeling protest become relevant in the age of Nationalism? One can't say anything about the future but for the present, this is unlikely. On the one hand, the force of nationalism is now beyond intellectual questioning. On the other hand, the world is yet to acquire a system of production that supersedes Capitalism. Notwithstanding the rising barriers to trade and the sway of protectionism, markets remain essential. In practical terms, whatever 'isms' are dreamt up, they have to function between these two poles. To borrow an idea from economics, Mishra is facing a 'reverse Tinbergen problem'. The Tinbergen Rule—named after the Dutch economist Jan Tinbergen—states that policymakers must have one policy tool for every policy target they have to achieve. Mishra has too many tools at hand and too few targets to achieve. Capitalism and Nationalism are sufficient for the task of ordering the world.

Intellectual protests shorn of some link with reality become sterile after a while. They don't die but remain in some rarefied world that remains inaccessible to ordinary people. One fears the same fate may befall Mishra's ideas even if they are eloquently argued. No country and people escape his piercing gaze. Unfortunately, this is the world one must work with even if one is trying to make Utopia. Alas, the world is content with much less. ■

THEATRE

Stage to Page

On its 60th anniversary, Bangalore Little Theatre produces a nine-volume collection of all its plays performed over the decades

By Parshathy J Nath

A scene from Bangalore Little Theatre's all-women production, *Six Dead Queens and an Inflatable Henry*, 2019

"THE POET IS an inventor—he creates, destroys and recreates. I am an explorer and having discovered something I must cling to it. Thus there is no competition between us. I must say in all humility that we complement each other's activities."

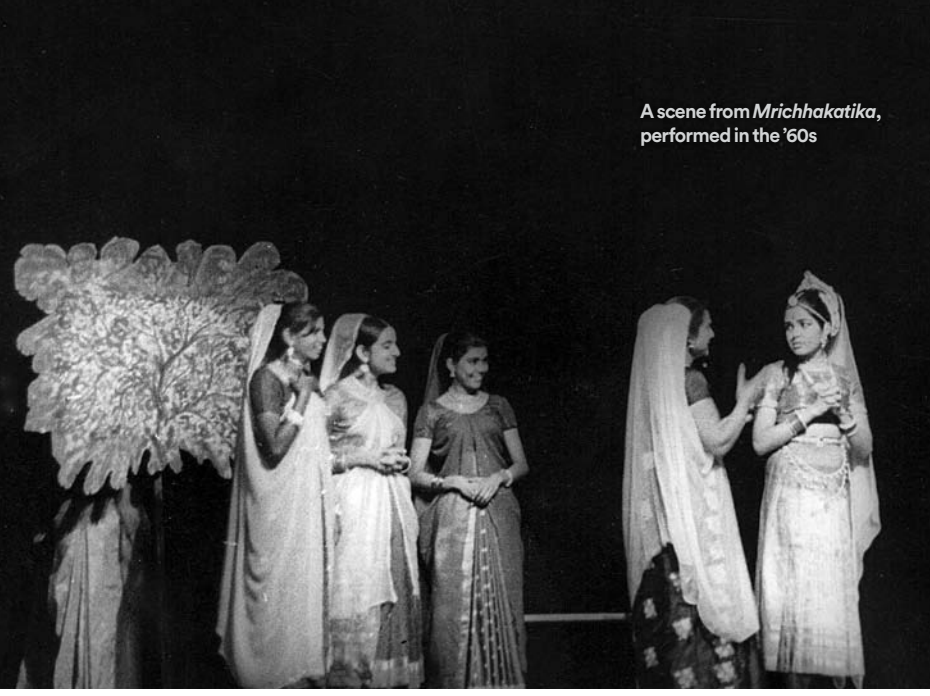
These words, spoken by Mahatma Gandhi to Rabindranath Tagore, transport us to the freedom struggle when the two thinkers debated furiously even as they acknowledged each other's greatness. Their conversations about Indian independence have been recreated into a compelling play, 'The Prophet and the Poet', by Vijay Padaki, an eminent theatre personality and founder trustee of Bangalore Little Theatre (BLT). The iconic community theatre troupe is celebrating its Diamond Jubilee this year. As part of the group's celebrations, the members have just released three volumes of plays: *Four Classics on the Indian Stage*, *The History of Ideas* (which includes 'The Prophet and the Poet') and *Children's Theatre*. The remaining six volumes will come out later this year.

At a time when live performances sound like a faraway dream, these books enable theatre lovers to feel the energy of the stage and relive the *addas* in the rehearsal rooms. The books are antidotes to the lockdown inertia as they capture the magic of drama, reveal nuances in characters and trigger a discussion on the history of theatre and its sustenance. The volumes are part of BLT's long-term commitment to theatre.

"We will be taking these works to as many schools and colleges. These are stageable manuscripts. I feel this is a great contribution to the education of young men and women. It is also a way of documentation of the amount of work BLT has put in," says Revathy Ashok, a trustee and board member.

Conceptualised under the New Voices programme, which addresses the dearth of playwrights in India, published by Vitasta, *The Four Classics on the Indian Stage* features translations of Sanskrit, Tamil and Kannada works and BLT's first ever Indian play in English *Mrichhakatika* performed in the 1960s. *The History of Ideas*, a collection of original plays from BLT members, pictures life through the eyes of personalities such as Swami Vivekananda, Tipu Sultan, Mahatma Gandhi and Albert Einstein. 'The Prophet and the Poet' which was performed in 2009 has done more than 110 shows, and the venues include Sabarmati ashram and auditoriums in the US and Trinidad and Tobago. *The Children's Theatre* features their landmark play 'The Ungrateful Man', a tale from the Panchatantra, which was written and directed by renowned educationist and artist David Horsburgh in 1966.

BLT was born in 1960 in a post-colonial India when English theatre meant bedroom comedies for the expat community living in Bangalore. However, theatre artists, Scott and Margaret Tod, a Scottish couple, had different plans. An electrical engineer by profession, Scott came to India for a posting in Bangalore, carting with him a treasure trove of skills he internalised from the Little Theatre movement; decentralising theatre activity from London and disseminating high quality theatre widely through training, outreach and community involvement. The fellow expat community was quick to be drawn to this man. However, he felt uncomfortable about their colonial atti-



A scene from *Mrichhakatika*, performed in the '60s

THE VOLUMES ARE PART OF BANGALORE LITTLE THEATRE'S LONG-TERM COMMITMENT TO THEATRE AND TRIGGER A DISCUSSION ON THE HISTORY OF THEATRE AND ITS SUSTENANCE

tude and went on to form BLT along with a few more expats of different countries and a sizeable group of Indians in 1960.

"The British always took pride in their theatre culture. However, the World War changed everything. Theatres were closed and London was bombed. They decided if they prided themselves so much in their theatre, why not go to the grassroots? The professional actors went out of their way to do community theatre. Even though they did theatre professionally, they retained the amateur status. They did not want to make a living out of theatre, but rather preserve the theatre tradition," recalls Padaki. And this is the spirit carried forward by BLT since its birth.

'Think globally and act locally' has always been their tagline. BLT has never remained insular, but always opened itself to other cultural currents taking place in the city like the blossoming of Kannada, Urdu and Hindi theatre. "Many of the stalwarts on the Kannada stage and screen have been members of BLT. The 70s was a wonderful period for Kannada theatre; with new writing, and professional inputs from the National School of Drama, we evolved new techniques. We have always acted from a space of collaboration," says Padaki.

Award-winning playwrights such as Mahesh Dattani and Poile Sengupta have also been a part of BLT. Theatre doyen CR Simha who acted and directed Kannada adaptations of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Othello* has also been associated with BLT. Filmmaker MS Sathyu directed American playwright Douglas Huff's 'Emil's Enemies' at a festival organised by BLT in 2003. Arundhati Raja, theatre personality and co-founder of Jagriti Theatre in Bengaluru has also had a stint with the BLT.

THE SUMMER PROJECT on Theatre (SPOT), an appreciation programme, has created generations of theatre viewers and critics. They receive at least 100 applicants a year, of which 20 are selected. Kannada actors and filmmakers such as Shashank Purushotham, Gulshan Devaiah and Pawan Kumar have also been a part of the SPOT programme. Padaki adds, "Even if three continue with BLT, we are still happy. The rest might have other day jobs or they might be going abroad to study. But we do not see that as a loss. They are going to be added to the pool of informed audiences. They are there to watch the BLT plays and promote them by recommending us to other people and bring them to watch our plays." Deepak, a graphic designer, says he had no idea of theatre when he first came to BLT. But a few sessions into SPOT, he was hooked. "The community word is real in the case of BLT. I made very good friends during my stint in SPOT which is programmed for 12 weeks and within this time, we get to know each other pretty well. It's like a great family. We feel like we are part of something. Rehearsals are the most exciting. The energy is just great. Where else do you get to sit, talk about everyday things, and sip chai for hours these days?"

Over the last 60 years, BLT has created a theatre ethos in Bengaluru, though its playwrighting modules, theatre appreciation programmes and outreach activities in schools. "BLT has always kept its door open to everyone. That's our philosophy. It's not membership or subscription driven," says Sridhar Ramanathan, the current convener and trustee and a member of BLT for many years.

BLT has not let the pandemic kill its spirit. During the lockdown, they presented a Zoom adaptation of *Silappadikaram*, the story of Kannagi in which the actors from their computers enacted a story harking back to an ancient time. The theatre collective has also begun to curate an online webinar series called 'Let's Talk Art' with theatre personalities.

Revathy says the group is inherently democratic and volunteer-driven. When they began, Scott had warned them of three poisons that could affect a theatre group, recalls Padaki. "One was a star-complex system. The others were financial carelessness and founder-centric management." In 1962, the group gave themselves a constitution and members of a managing committee were elected. This has ensured a system of transparency and a legacy that is thriving into its sixth decade. ■

RAJEEV MASAND

Streaming Blockbusters

After holding out nearly five months, the word in industry circles is that the producers of the *Coolie No. 1* remake have succumbed and made a deal to send the film straight to streaming. This **Varun Dhawan** and **Sara Ali Khan**-starrer has been complete since before the pandemic, but producer **Vashu Bhagnani** insisted he would wait for cinema halls to reopen and release the film theatrically. However, it appears that the financial stakes have proven too high to stick to that plan...especially in a scenario where the reopening of cinemas is a distant dream. According to sources in the trade, **David Dhawan**'s remake of his own **Govinda** and **Karisma Kapoor**-starrer from 1995 will drop on Amazon Prime Video in October.

During a conversation I had with him recently, **Naseeruddin Shah** pointed out that it would be interesting to see how big, commercial films that were intended for the cinemas will be received when streamed directly into people's homes. "I'm curious to know how a **Salman Khan** film will do when watched privately," he said. "I think the age of those big two and three hundred crore blockbusters may be over," he added.

Naseer was no doubt referring to the sort of crowd-pleasing entertainers featuring prominent stars that tend to play to the gallery, and are designed expressly to both deliver and exploit the shared nature of the theatrical movie experience. The original *Coolie No. 1*, with its thin plot but chartbuster songs, broad comedy and winning cast was exactly that kind of film, and the remake will likely be similarly designed. But with its release and consumption model so radically altered, will it evoke the same response? It's something all of Bollywood is watching closely. There is, understandably, considerable financial pressure on other films like *Sooryavanshi*, *'83*, and the Salman-starrer *Radhe*, that are either complete or more or less finished.

A Multitasker's Memoir

Don't put anything past **Priyanka Chopra**. Every opportunity she's got, the actress has proved that she's a true multitasker. Between her acting gigs (she was filming *Matrix 4* until recently), production deals with streaming platforms (she's developing original global shows and films for Amazon Prime Video) and championing her husband and frequently travelling with him for his concerts, Priyanka recently also completed her memoir.

She announced on social media the book had been sent to the publisher. Titled *Unfinished*, the memoir will likely cover her rise and rise from her early years to her Miss India and Miss Universe wins, her Bollywood journey, her successful stint in the West, finding love with **Nick Jonas** and how she balances her professional commitments with her personal life. The book is expected to be out before the end of the year or early next year, and Priyanka put up a picture of the manuscript declaring that it was an "amazing feeling" to see "these pages printed on paper for the first time".

Hot Right Now

Swara Bhasker's new streaming show *Flesh* is an unsettling thriller about the widespread sex trafficking network in India. Disturbing scenes of abuse, of abducted children being forced to watch pornography and of young girls being transported in containers make it a difficult but essential watch. Swara plays a ball-busting cop who has little regard for the rules and is especially allergic to men who treat children and women unkindly. She jumps in to help a set of NRI parents whose teenage daughter is kidnapped from a wedding and commits herself completely to the case. Also good is **Akshay Oberoi** playing a permanently drugged-out bad guy in Kolkata who is a central figure in the trafficking ring.

The parallels with the **Rani Mukerji**-starrer *Mardaani* aside, *Flesh* is artfully scripted by *Andhadhun* scribe **Pooja Ladha Surti** who fashions the narrative as three separate subplots that meet to reveal a big twist.

The show doesn't pull any punches in its depiction of extreme violence and abuse, but it is the very uncomfortable nature of the subject that makes it such a compelling watch. ■

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